

School of hard knocks

Contractors share their experiences in finding, hiring and training office personnel.

Mark Lay of AA Tex Lawn in Indian Trail, North Carolina, typified many contractors' approach to administration when starting out. He viewed office help as an extravagance and an unnecessary overhead expense, and did everything himself until his company reached \$750,000 in annual revenue.

"By that time I was probably spending 35 hours a week on paperwork," he says. "And even that wasn't enough; I'm sure a lot of things were just falling through the cracks.

"Worst of all," he concludes, "I was borrowing time that I should have been spending with my family. It's hard to put a price tag on that."

Joel Wihebrink of Wihebrink Landscape Management in Warsaw, Indiana, survived another mistake common to young companies.

He hired his first office worker at \$150,000 in revenue, but tried to keep the cost to the absolute minimum. He also underestimated the appeal of a part-time position to better qualified candidates.

"I started hiring from temp agencies, and it was a disaster. Those people were the ones who couldn't find a job any place else. I tried going to community colleges looking for recent graduates with office management degrees, but they had zero practical experience."

As a result, Wihebrink suffered a series of crises in the office.

"Between performance issues and people moving and leaving to have babies, we cycled through 10 people in nine seasons," he says. "And every time our stress level went way up and productivity went way down."

Fortunately, both contractors avoided the worst consequences when their administrative worries finally caught up with them. Both got serious about finding competent office help and are now thriving. Lay's company has grown to \$3 million with an office staff of 3-1/2,

"Looking back it's amazing how much effort I was putting in. And yet I was still not doing everything I should have, like keeping a close eye on cash flow," he says. "When we finally hired our first office person, she put in 20 hours a week. But she quickly got up to speed and we bumped her to 35 hours.

"Then there was the opportunity cost," adds Lay. "It was amazing after I hired someone to find out how much difference spending just 10 more hours a week on sales makes."

"I finally got it through my skull that this is a critical position even in a tiny business. It's no less important than a top foreman. I wouldn't pull someone off the street [and] tell them they were responsible for laying 30,000 square feet of brick..."

— Joel Wihebrink

and Wihebrink found a great, experienced office manager and expects to break \$1 million this season.

But both say that if they had to do it all over again, they'd have planned to bring in good office help early on.

"It should have been one of my first steps," says Wihebrink. "I could have avoided a lot of hard licks."

Penny wise and pound foolish

In retrospect Lay says he thought he was being thrifty by doing the work himself. But in reality he was paying a high price.

Wihebrink says he had a misconception of what an office manager should be. At first he was looking for a someone to sit in front of the phone and relieve some of the paperwork burden.

"But when I tried to hand off some of the more complex tasks was really frustrating. I'm a pretty organized person but a terrible teacher. Trying to show them how I handled things was like having my fingernails pulled out."

The fundamental mistake, says Wihebrink, was discounting the difficulty of the work, undervaluing the position and underestimating the caliber of person needed to fill it.

"I finally got it through my skull that this is a critical position even in a tiny business. It's no less important than a top foreman. I wouldn't pull someone off the street, tell them they were responsible for laying 30,000 square feet of brick and a half-dozen boulder walls this year and say 'ok, you can start drinking from the firehose now.'

"It takes forethought and time to find the right person and to show them all the ropes. And you can't bring someone in at minimum wage and expect that they'll give you \$20 an hour work."

Defining the role

Both contractors say they'd now strive to get their ducks in a row before bringing

someone into the office.

Wihebrink says that after his disappointments with office staff, he started putting together an office procedure manual that details every task step by step—even what to say when answering the phone. Working on it when he could, the manual took him more than a year and a half to complete.

"I think a good office manager should be able to think on his or her feet," he says. "But it's a great training tool and reference. I also wanted to lay down the gospel, to make my expectations for how things should be done perfectly clear."

One of the most important tasks Wihebrink's office manager now performs is managing his schedule. "She tells me where to go and what to do next," he says, "so I'm not wasting time driving all over the county."

Consultant Dickran Babrigan goes over the numbers with Cory (left) and Mark Lay of AA Tex Lawn.



Lay says getting one's office act together is very much a catch-22, because it's quite difficult to spend more time organizing before hiring someone who's supposed to help you get organized. But it has to be done nonetheless.

"We were a little panicked after making our first hire. I wasn't sure what to hand off, and I had her doing kind of a mishmash of sending letters, tracking time on jobs, tracking down discrepancies on vendor statements, and so on. I also made the mistake of bringing someone on in the spring.

"We had to play it by ear for a while, but her competence and confidence grew pretty quickly and we sorted it out. But I definitely could have planned it better."

Personality and performance

In addition to thinking about what an office manager should do, Lay and Wihebrink say it's important to think about the type of person needed to accomplish those tasks.

"I'd never hired anyone for this kind of work and had no idea what I should be looking for," says Lay. "I talked to people I knew in the corporate world, and to [consultant Dickran Babrigan], which helped us a lot."

Lay was fortunate to find a woman who had worked in an attorney's office and brought with her strong people and organizational skills. "She brought ideas I would have never thought of. Working in a law firm, she had to know how to make information available at everyone's fingertips."

Wihebrink says he's discovered how much personality affects performance. As a member of consultant Monroe Porter's PROSULT program, he has access to personality tests and uses them in his hiring decisions.

"There's one trait that's hard to put your finger on; I guess the best word to describe it would be 'predictability.' They have to do things in a consistent, predictable way. And they have to be able to spot my patterns and predict what I'm going to do. It's sort of like ballroom dancing, where both people are picking up on each other's cues without speaking.

"And I've learned from my experience and from talking to other contractors that an office manager really has to have a bit of pit bull in their personality. They're the company's gatekeeper, and they can't be afraid to stand up to customers, employees and especially the owner.

"I told my office manager that she has to treat me as if I have a drinking problem and to not accept my excuses or let me bowl her over. She has to make sure I'm where I should be and that I'm sticking to my schedule. And she's pretty good at it because not only has she worked in a busy accountant's office, she also has three grown boys.

Patience is the companion of wisdom

Finding and keeping the right office manager also requires an attitude adjustment on the owner's part. Lay says patience is the most important and most difficult virtue to develop.

"For the first position we advertised heavily and got 375 resumes and conducted 15 interviews," he says. "It was a long process, but worth it."

Wihebrink says he's also become more patient in hiring and avoided the temptation to just get it over with. "I take things one step at a time and make sure all the bases are covered," he says, adding that he now conducts both credit and background checks on all applicants.

Both say they've also become more patient in training after the hire. "It's a different kind of mind-set," says Wihebrink. "My interest has always been in the field, where the 'action' is. I'd always approached the office as a necessary evil and gave it the minimum attention possible. But now I approach the office manager's position the same way I do a crew leader's and say, 'We're going to start out slowly and stay at this step until you learn it and feel comfortable.'"

Says Lay, "It takes a lot of time to coach people along to do each new task the way you want, monitor their performance and give them feedback. I've taught myself to think of it as an investment, a short-term sacrifice that eventually pays big dividends." **PRO**

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