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## BUILDING A MODERN Maintenance Staff

Superintendents from across the country weigh in on how they have adjusted to the labor challenges facing the golf course maintenance industry.

**BY ADAM MOELLER, DIRECTOR, GREEN SECTION EDUCATION**

For many superintendents today, hiring and building a reliable maintenance staff is the number one concern heading into each golf season. It's increasingly difficult to fill all the maintenance staff positions each year, and the rising cost of labor is forcing superintendents to adjust how they maintain the course each day. The amount of labor available directly impacts course conditioning, so it's understandable why being short-staffed is such a serious concern.

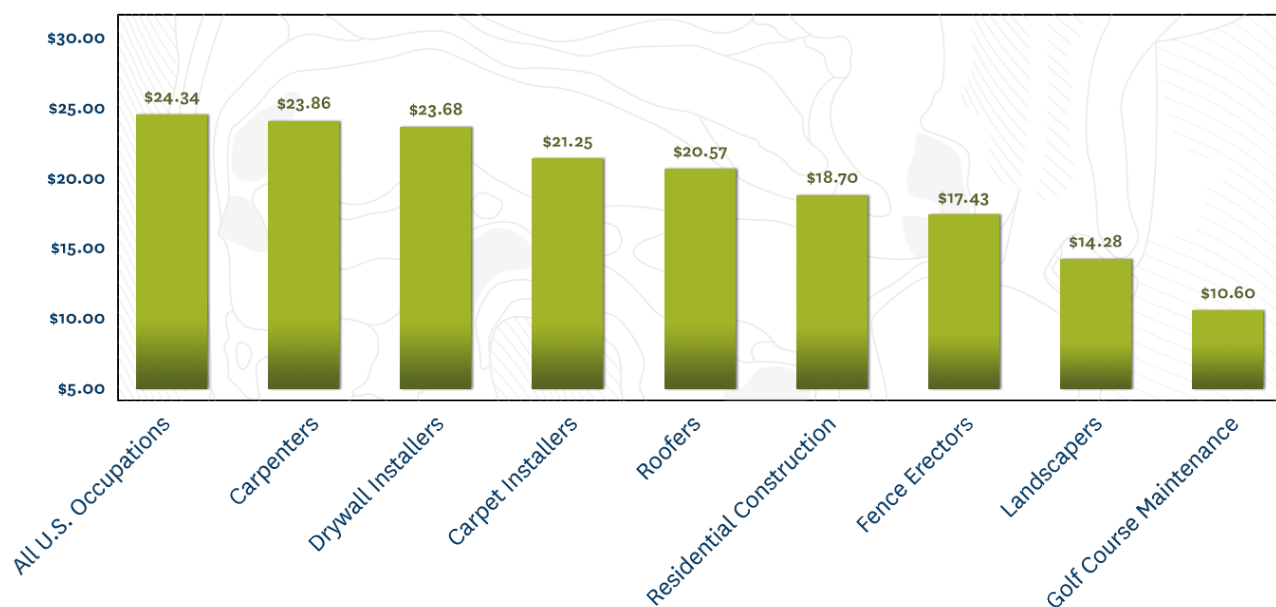
There are many theories as to why it is harder to build a maintenance staff now than in years past, but focusing on those issues can be counterproductive. Instead, this article will highlight various strategies that superintendents are using to build high-quality, reliable maintenance teams in today's challenging labor market.

## Competitive Wages

Competent, well-trained employees are a tremendous asset and paying them appropriately is vital. Unfortunately, the average hourly wage for general and seasonal golf maintenance staff members is significantly lower than many other industries that are competing for the same candidates. As a result, many superintendents point to the rising cost of labor and competition with other industries as the primary reason why it's hard to hire employees and minimize [turnover](#). Money is certainly a key factor in anyone's decision about where to work, so paying a competitive wage is important. Steady increases in the hourly wage you pay new and existing staff each year will help you stay ahead of competition from other industries and minimum wage increases.

### NATIONAL AVERAGES FOR HOURLY EMPLOYEE EARNINGS

The average hourly wage for general golf course maintenance staff members is considerably less than wages in other industries.



In addition to competitive wages, the benefits package offered to staff is also a great tool for hiring and retention. Jared Nemitz, director of golf course grounds at The Peninsula Club in Cornelius, North Carolina, ensures that everyone understands the health and compensation benefits package when discussing wages with his staff. “The value of health care, dental insurance, employer contributions to retirement plans, meal allowances and many other benefits we provide are easy to overlook when comparing jobs on hourly wages alone. The more someone understands the compensation value of their benefits package, the less likely they will be to leave a job for an extra \$1 per hour,” said Nemitz.

Unfortunately, many courses offering competitive wages and benefits still struggle to fill their open positions. For others, paying more to overcome the rising cost of labor is not an option. In these situations,

implementing strategies that [improve productivity and efficiency](#) – e.g., using triplex greens mowers, machine-raking bunkers, and reducing maintenance in nonessential areas – is a good way to have more impact with less staff. That said, if you are forced to operate with fewer people on your maintenance staff, paying the remaining staff a little more is probably a good idea.

## Part-Time Positions

Many superintendents have reduced the number of full-time positions and increased their part-time staff to overcome the labor challenges facing the industry. Josh Lewis, superintendent at Sharon Heights Golf and Country Club in Menlo Park, California, has had good results with hiring more part-time staff in the last few years. “Having more employees available for morning maintenance is a big reason why increasing the number of part-time employees makes sense for us,” said Lewis. A larger part-time staff also allows for more maintenance activities on weekends. This gives superintendents the flexibility to produce the best playing conditions on the most important days of the week.

“Many people in our area have multiple jobs given the cost of living, so we’ve become more comfortable with the idea that working on our maintenance staff may not be the primary job for some of our employees. Recognizing this has allowed us to benefit from hiring more part-time staff,” said Lewis.



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Hiring more part-time staff can also yield significant financial savings. At his previous job, Scott Bordner, superintendent at Union League National Golf Club in Cape May, New Jersey, went from having a staff of 24 total employees in 2011 to 32 employees in 2019, with 65% of those employees being seasonal staff. Bordner calculated that the total labor hours worked by his staff of 32 employees was equivalent to a full-time staff of 22. The changes Bordner implemented allowed him to maximize maintenance efficiency, produce a great golf experience, and led to an average annual labor savings of \$80,000.

A key to success with hiring more part-time staff is that your core full-time staff needs to be capable of providing adequate training and supervision. Scheduling conflicts can easily occur when you have numerous part-time staff members so having contingency plans for vacations, sick days, and other staffing issues is important.

## Flexible Work Schedules

Until recently, flexible work schedules were rare in the golf industry. Introducing four- and six-hour shifts or shorter work weeks is becoming more common. These new schedules open opportunities for part-time employees that might not otherwise be interested in working on the course.

At Southern Hills Country Club in Tulsa, Oklahoma, superintendent Russ Myers began noticing the increasing challenge of filling seasonal staff positions. Myers spoke about the labor challenges with Bordner, who encouraged him to hire high school students for seasonal staff positions.



Our seasonal staff only work 24 to 30 hours each week, typically between 6:30 a.m. and 11 a.m., which allows them to still be a high school kid and enjoy summer.

*RUSS MYERS, SUPERINTENDENT, SOUTHERN HILLS COUNTRY CLUB | TULSA, OKLAHOMA*

Myers began speaking with local high school guidance counselors and quickly realized there was a lot of interest in seasonal employment among the students. For the past three seasons, Myers has had great results with hiring high school students for seasonal staff positions, largely because he's adjusted the work schedule to make the job more appealing. "We over-hire the number of seasonal staff we would normally rely on each summer. Our seasonal staff only work 24 to 30 hours each week, typically between 6:30 a.m. and 11 a.m., which allows them to still be a high school kid and enjoy summer," said Myers. The over-hiring also means that there isn't much of an impact on maintenance if a few of the seasonal staffers take vacation or sick days. Myers mentioned that these high school students have been reliable and high-energy, which creates a positive atmosphere for the entire staff.

This hiring approach is paying off at Southern Hills, according to Myers, but it is not without its challenges. Hiring high school and college students usually means that there will be staffing issues during the spring and fall when the students are in school. Training is also critical, and with any new staff members superintendents should expect a learning curve with equipment operation and some extra wear and tear. According to Myers, the benefits of hiring high school students for seasonal staff far outweigh the challenges.

In addition to introducing flexible hours or nontraditional work weeks, offering alternating weekend options and more flexible schedules for assistant superintendents and equipment technicians is also becoming the norm. Josh Lewis has introduced more work flexibility for his core staff and feels it's extremely important given how demanding summer weather can be on the turf in California. "I want my assistants to rotate every third week with one of us coming in on a different schedule – e.g., 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. – during the long, dry California summer. This strategy provides the 12-14 hours of coverage we need at the course each day while keeping everyone as fresh as possible. We also do our best to minimize the number of weeks where we're working more than 55 hours. This allows for a healthy work-life balance and helps reduce the risk of people burning out and leaving the industry," said Lewis.

## Staff Mentoring and Development

At Sparrows Point Country Club in Baltimore, Maryland, superintendent Tyler Bloom faced an uphill battle with building a maintenance team. "We had little to no applicants for our open positions and were losing employees faster than they were coming in. The staff turnover rate was near 50%, but realistically we lost close to 75% of our maintenance productivity because positions remained unfilled for weeks," said Bloom. These issues began to take a toll on the course and hurt employee morale. Bloom became



*Hiring more part-time staff makes more employees available for morning maintenance, but it is crucial that full-time staff can provide adequate leadership, training and supervision.*

increasingly concerned because the course faced an issue with hiring entry-level employees and lacked a developmental program for skilled positions.

Bloom quickly recognized the need to spend more time on mentoring and developing the existing staff. His new approach to building a maintenance staff evolved into a formalized apprenticeship program for high school students approved through the state and federal Department of Labor. Here are the critical changes Bloom implemented:

- The course moved away from having 12 to 16 full-time employees working 30 to 44 hours each week to a consistent 40-hour work week for 10 full-time employees.
- A 10- to 12-person part-time team comprised mostly of high school and college students was created to allow more tasks to be performed in shorter windows of time, reducing overtime and costs for benefits.
- If a full-time employee left the staff, a part-time individual who earned the opportunity for more hours replaced them.
- Four-hour shifts – morning, midday and afternoon – were introduced to extend the total time for course maintenance from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and maximize windows for maintenance.
- Assistant superintendents were given flexibility to adjust their schedules so they matched up with the shifts that now extended to 6 p.m.

In addition to adjusting scheduling and total staff size, Bloom began using section maintenance to provide more supervision of entry-level staff and a support system to cross-train entry-level workers. A digital job board and web application that allows for monitoring maintenance operations helped chart progress and efficiency. For instance, the efficiency of tasks such as rough mowing, detail trim work and bunker surround mowing was improved by performing them in the afternoons when the play volume was low and the part-time staff could work more freely on the course. A supervisor would oversee these tasks, which improved their leadership skills.

Below is a summary of the benefits Bloom has experienced since implementing the developmental model:

- Course conditions and golfer satisfaction have steadily improved.
- Employee turnover has gone from 50% to 10%.
- Since January 2018, Sparrows Point has not had an unfilled maintenance staff position.
- Despite minimum wage increases over a four-year span, the labor budget has remained flat.
- Openings for assistant superintendents or other skilled positions have been filled from within the department since 2016.
- Several staff members have received local GCSAA chapter scholarships, as well as on-the-job training subsidies from the Department of Labor.

Bloom emphasizes that teaching employability and soft skills are critical components of building and retaining a workforce. “Mentoring and coaching can be formalized,” says Bloom. The developmental model implemented at Sparrows Point evolved into an apprenticeship program for the local youth and existing employees at the course. It also serves as a recruiting tool for potential employees. Bloom is proud that apprentices at his course gain industry-specific certificates and professional recognition. The apprentices can also receive college credit if partnered with the proper academic program.

## **Bonuses and Incentives**

Bonuses and incentives can go a long way with your employees, or potential employees. The most obvious incentive program for the maintenance staff is allowing them to play the course for free. Golf privileges vary significantly from course to course, but allowing the staff to play at least one day each week is fairly standard. That said, setting up some parameters and guidelines to help avoid potential issues with paying golfers is wise. Other incentives include new rain gear or other work clothing, meal plans, staff golf outings and parties. Don’t underestimate how much your staff appreciates these incentives.

Some superintendents have had success with implementing creative bonus programs paid out monthly or quarterly. Communicating the parameters of the bonus program is crucial to get the most benefit from it. Monitor the success of any bonus program and be prepared to change it up as necessary.

## Recruiting

Many courses have utilized internet job sites like Indeed or Craigslist for finding potential employees. These internet sites often yield a lot of applicants, but many superintendents report that they haven't led to a lot of positive outcomes. In the last six months, Jared Nemitz has relied exclusively on hiring new staff recommended by the existing staff. "We provide a \$50, \$100 and \$150 cash incentive for employees who recommend a new staff person that works at the course for 30, 90 and 150 days. Capitalizing on leads from the existing staff has resulted in some great new additions to our team," said Nemitz.

Recruiting local teachers, policeman, fireman and veterans has also worked well for Nemitz. "We recognize these people might only be looking for part-time or seasonal work, but they've been valuable assets when we've had them work for us," said Nemitz. "One thing that has helped with recruiting is that we make sure the potential employee knows that we maintain a fun atmosphere at all times. Keeping it fun at work can go a long way, and potentially make the difference between someone working for me or moving on to job that pays a little more money," said Nemitz.

Scott Bordner suggests recruiting through local [FFA Chapters](#) and Boy Scout troops. "The FFA students and Boy Scouts enjoy the outdoors and that translates well into working on the course. Community Facebook groups have also been a surprising success. Many times, there is a young person looking for a job that doesn't look on our normal platforms and many retirees came to our team through these sites as their kids informed them of openings. It hit two important demographics on one site," said Bordner.

Nelson Caron, director of golf course and grounds maintenance at The Ford Plantation in Savannah, Georgia, has had success using old-school recruiting methods. Caron is very proactive and regularly posts job flyers around town, hands out business cards to workers at restaurants and grocery stores, and visits with local high school teachers to highlight the benefits of working on golf courses. When talking with potential employees, Caron often points out that working at his course can provide more consistent weekly hours than other industries – e.g., landscapers – that might be more impacted by weather. This is likely to be particularly appealing to employees that value a consistent paycheck.

## Conclusion

The labor challenges facing golf are not going away. Offering competitive wages, utilizing more part-time staff, creating flexible work schedules, mentoring and development programs, bonuses and incentives, and proactive recruiting methods are just a few examples of strategies that are helping superintendents meet their staffing needs in the current labor market. As leaders at the course, it's important to be open to new ways of building a maintenance staff. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but if you don't adapt in some way it will likely become even more difficult to produce the type of playing conditions needed to make you and the course successful.

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