

Perks, fun keep steady work force

Hillsboro | Bob Grover's company offers benefits and gatherings, bringing about low turnover

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SPECIAL TO THE OREGONIAN

Rafting trips, soccer games and afternoon barbecues are part of the employment package for the 70 employees of Pacific Landscape Management, a Hillsboro company that builds and maintains landscapes for commercial properties.

Employees who have been with the company at least a year get health insurance benefits and retirement programs.

Those kinds of perks, available to even entry-level employees, are part of the reason the company has low turnover, particularly among crew leaders and supervisors, said Bob Grover, company president.

Grover talked about workplace perks during the "Economic Livability for All" business summit held last month in Beaverton. The forum, sponsored by the Vision Action Network, a nonprofit group committed to collaborative community-based problem solving, gave business leaders an opportunity to discuss innovative ways of recruiting, hiring and keeping employees.

Businesses of all sizes are struggling to find and hire a qualified work force, particularly for low-wage positions, said Jonathan Schlueter, executive director of the Westside Economic Alliance, a business advocacy group, and a moderator of one of the summit panels.

"We have a shortage of qualified and skilled work force in just about any sector of the economy," Schlueter said. "All companies have this common denominator: They all have low-skill, low-wage jobs that are vital to the business. We all have needs for these workers throughout the operation."



Employees of Pacific Landscape Management, Max Mandujano (foreground) and Roberto Rivera, mow the lawn at Synopsys Technology Park in Hillsboro

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But finding the employees is difficult for reasons that include a lack of skills among potential employees, language barriers and transportation issues.

Many employees cannot afford to live near where they work, Schlueter said. That can make it hard for them to get to work and leads to an unreliable work force, he said.

Business owners must come up with creative ways to support their workers, Schlueter said.

"We must recruit and train workers to invest themselves in the company. They need to feel respected, valued and needed," Schlueter said. "Keeping a qualified work force goes beyond the basic health and retirement benefits," Grover added.

When Grover and partners Ron Knesal and Elias Godinez started their landscape company six years ago, they made staff development and training a priority.

Grover said based on their own experience, "we felt best about the job when we felt like we were part of the team.

"You want people to stay here because they like it here. So we get beyond the typical benefit package to create a family feel."

The twice monthly, after-work barbecues, where people are encouraged to come early and stay late, and other activities are part of making employees feel comfortable and valued, Grover said.

An extensive internal training program is geared toward preparing people to do well. Because the company invests in the staff, Grover says, many of the employees will invest in and commit to the company.

The company provides on-site English classes for employees who do not speak English but want to work in supervisory positions at the landscape company. And it pays half the expense.

It's expensive to provide the classes and other programs and perks, Grover said, but it pays off in the long run.

"The cost of the programs is offset, because they lead to fewer mistakes that cost you money, and they lead to greater productivity that saves you money," Grover said.

Employees that feel respected and happy also are likely to provide better customer service, Grover said. His customers notice.

"Customers like to know that their vendors are doing things to provide well-trained, happy employees," Grover said.