



Murray Cook, left, is helping the Chinese prepare the 2008 Olympic baseball field in Beijing.

Developing *your career in sports turf*

By Murray Cook

Most of us got into the sports turf industry because we love sports, are passionate about landscape design, and enjoy working outdoors to create safe, terrific looking athletic fields. We spend countless hours meticulously planning every aspect of a new field construction project yet rarely spend more than a few moments to consider our career goals, much less develop a strategic plan for achieving them.

As we grow professionally, we see opportunities to improve our skills and expertise

in very specialized and technical areas. While it is okay for some of this discovery process to occur by chance, professional fulfillment requires the successful planning and execution of a strategy that takes short- and long-term career goals into consideration.

The good news here is that you've completed the most important part of the journey — you've made a decision to be part of the exciting and dynamic sports turf industry. Ours is a growing industry with many opportunities. Research from a variety of sources points to continued industry growth as participation in

all levels of sport continues to increase both domestically and internationally.

Strategic approach to career development

An effective starting point for designing a career development plan is the creation of a career strategy map. Like a blueprint, your career strategy map can help you visualize your career development by taking into consideration the end goal. Your strategy map can become a working document that you can adjust and fine tune throughout your professional development.

As with any plan, it helps to put your thoughts down on paper. Begin by drawing a line to represent your career trajectory. Make marks along the trajectory to indicate your current position and your career goals at different intervals (5, 10, 20 years, etc.). Next, write out the steps that you need to accomplish your goals at each interval. With each advance, consider what additional responsibilities you will need to take on and the skills required to manage those responsibilities. Divide your goals into both short and long term objectives and think about the best ways to accomplish each. Take a strategic approach to thinking by carefully considering what training and skills will differentiate you from others who will be competing with you for the same opportunities. Write in detail the requirements needed to give you an edge.

Once you have established your timeline, requirements, and list of competitive differentiators you need at each step along your career, begin



Blair County Ballpark, Altoona, PA

thinking about what resources are available to you to meet your goals. Then, think critically about how each of the following ideas maps back to your specific career goals and where along your path each should appear.

Continuing education is among the best ways of accomplishing both short- and long-term goals. Research shows that two in three sports turf managers have a four-year college degree or an advanced degree. If one of your goals is to rise to a top management position, an advanced degree is one of the best ways to compete.

Start by exploring the programs offered at colleges and universities in your area. Many schools now offer a wide range of degrees in sports turf management that can help you gain the technical skills required to advance along your career path. The good news is that many colleges and universities offer part-time and flexible class schedules to accommodate working professionals.

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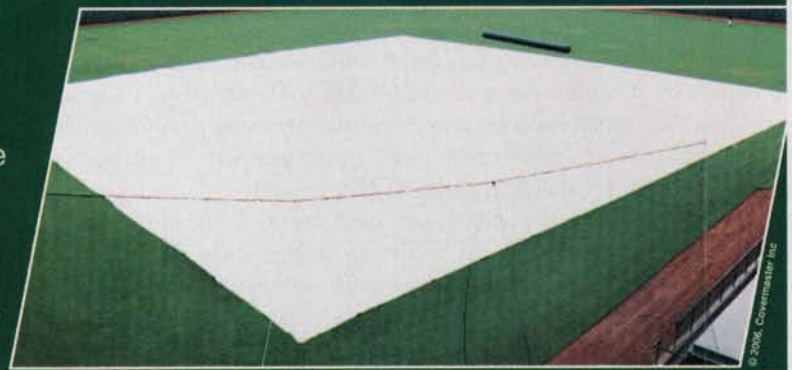
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Professional association membership

Membership in professional groups like the Sports Turf Managers Association (STMA) provides an abundance of opportunities for education and professional growth. Many of the best learning experiences come from interaction with industry peers who have already overcome challenges similar to the ones that each of us grapple with every day.

Association membership is also a great way of finding potential employers that can help advance your career. The STMA, for example, offers members access to an online career center where you can search for the latest openings in the turf industry. These searches are customizable and can help you match opportunities based on your level of experience and geographic location.

Professional certification

In 2000, the STMA created a certification program to help promote professionalism within the sports turf industry. Certification is a great way to achieve recognition for your knowledge of managing sports fields and can also help improve future employment prospects. Applications for certification are available on the STMA website.

In order to become certified, you must meet certain criteria as a combination of education level and years of experience. Certification also requires the successful completion of an examination covering four major areas of sports field management, including: agronomics, pest management, administration, and sports-specific field management.

Strategic management of your career also requires finding employment opportunities that meet your goals. Challenging projects sometimes require us to spend more time with our co-workers than we do with our families, which underscores the importance of finding a team that shares your core values and with whom you enjoy working.

When evaluating potential employers, carefully consider the firm's values. These should be readily available on its website or be communicated through conversations with the team. Pay attention to what is said about corporate values to ensure they match your own. If community service is important to you, for example, ask your potential new employer if they have community service programs in which you can become involved.

Top firms in the industry recognize the importance of recruitment and retention and seek to create supportive, family-friendly environments where individuals are recognized for their talents and challenged to grow beyond their comfort zone. Many times top firms will also provide



Spartan Stadium in East Lansing, MI

career planning and management programs through their human resources department to help guide professional development. Companies like Brickman and Disney have an extensive HR function that provides a significant value for the employee as it relates to career development and advancement opportunities.

Additional career strategy decisions may also require an in-depth look at your potential employer's structure, types of projects awarded, and geographic presence. If your professional goals include working on international field construction projects or collaborating with multi-disciplinary teams, perhaps a

large firm is the right choice for you. If you are at a point where you are interviewing for new career opportunities, ask potential employers about career development plans and the specific types of projects you will be working on at different stages of your career. Networking within the sports turf industry is one of the best ways to determine if you are on the right career path. When joining a team, league, or the STMA, your first goal should be to reach out to your peers and introduce yourself.

Looking ahead

By taking the time to map out a strategy outlining your short- and long-term career objectives, it becomes easier to visualize specific requirements needed for professional advancement and discover the resources to help you get there. Revisit your career goals often and make adjustments to your map as you go; part of the journey requires mid-course corrections.

If you are at a crossroads in your career, think strategically about how your next move fits into both your short- and long-term objectives. Continuing education, becoming active in associations like STMA, or pursuing certification can all go along way toward accelerating your professional development. Finding a new employer may also lead to new growth opportunities and professional satisfaction, particularly if the firm's values are aligned with your own and expose you to challenging new projects that can expand your skills.

Ours is a growing industry that is full of fun and rewarding opportunities for those who take a strategic approach to managing their careers. But where we go from here depends on the design and execution of a career strategy that will lead to professional fulfillment. ■

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