

Feeling stuck in the mud?

By Diane Stafford

This is the second in a series of six articles in the new Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront.

In turf management, as in any industry, the way to re-invigorate a career—if not nab a promotion—may be through education.

Years of hands-on experience counts, but if you want a resume that attracts job offers, it helps to have a 4- or 2-year college degree, continuing education credits, and industry certifications.

Darian Daily, head grounds keeper at Paul Brown Stadium in Cincinnati, came to the job with a bachelor's degree.

"People like me who got in the big leagues in the past 5 years pretty much all have 4-year degrees in plant science or turf management or something similar," Daily observes.

"Right now, our industry is growing at a pace where there are a lot of 2-year associate degrees you can get in athletic field management, golf course management, turf grass science, and the like. It's almost to the point where a 2-year degree is a must to get your foot in the door."

Fortunately, many community colleges have the course hours and offerings that fit the schedules and needs of adult workers. Also, several universities offer distance learning curriculum in turf management that culminate in a degree.

But while it's vital to stay on top of technical developments in the field, it's equally important to buff up "people" skills.

Jeff Fowler, turf grass educator in western Pennsylvania for the Penn State Cooperative Extension, said turf management careers are more likely to stagnate because of faulty communication or management practices.

"Knowing the right fertilizer is essential, but the real breakdown in careers can come in personnel issues," says Fowler, who's lectured on the '7 habits of highly defective sports turf managers.' Those of us in middle management aren't managers by training, but leadership can be developed if you take advantage of all the resources out there on the Web, in bookstores, in podcasts.



Chalkboard image courtesy of istockphoto.com.

"If you're mowing grass with your MP3 player in your ear, listen to a management podcast some time instead of music. You can always learn something about dealing with people."

Along with technical skills, management training also may be available in classroom settings.

Daily, who serves as chairman of the STMA Information Outreach committee, acknowledged that it may not be financially feasible to "go back to school." Even so, there are plenty of other ways to update and enhance professional credentials in turf management.

That's a good thing, because the latest survey of STMA members found that nearly three-fourths of the respondents said they wanted to learn more about business and professional development opportunities.

One option is to attend the STMA's annual conference, held each January, which offers many concurrent continuing education choices.

The same STMA membership survey found that more than two-thirds of employers will pay all costs for members to attend the annual conference, and another one-fourth will subsidize part of the conference costs. In just a few days (and, for many, a relatively low cost) the equivalent of a college semester's worth of updated information can be had.

The association also offered a pilot regional conference this year, and plans to add two more next summer. In addition, 31 local chapters offer periodic continuing education seminars. STMA members also can take 14 courses online on the association website.

The ultimate goal, aside from gaining knowledge for knowledge's sake, is to obtain professional certification.

"Certification is a good tool to have," Daily said. "It makes a person more marketable."

Consider getting a commercial applicators' license, generally obtained through state agriculture departments. Some colleges offer half-day to two-day classes to help prepare for the test. Call the Ag department in your state to learn its test details.

Beyond a college degree and an applicator's license, a professional goal should be the Certified Sports Field Manager, or CSFM, credential. (Similar professional certifications exist for parks and recreation professionals and landscapers. All of them indicate a more than passing commitment to the profession.)

To keep the credential current once it's obtained, a hefty dose of continuing education credits is expected in the turf management industry. The association gives 0.1 credits for every contact hour of continuing education and asks for 3 credits to be accumulated over a 3-year period. That equates to about 10 hours a year of class or seminar attendance, usually obtained by attending association or state conferences or local chapter field days.

"Continuing education is the key," Daily said. "Keep maximizing your opportunities to professionalize your career. A sports field manager is a professional. Every Sunday, I have \$120 million worth of people playing on my field. I need it to be in good shape and managed with the latest information possible. Parks and Rec departments and schools have the same expectations."

In addition to surfing university websites to find some of the latest turf science research, Daily advised taking a basic business or finance class to buff up a resume.

"You don't need to get a finance or accounting degree, but you need to understand enough business buzzwords to keep lines of communication open with the business offices you deal with," he suggested.

The ability to understand a profit and loss statement is a plus. And all but essential these days is familiarity with basic computer programs such as Excel, PowerPoint, Word, and e-mail. Again, community colleges are accessible and relatively inexpensive places to find and take computer classes.

As stated at the outset, strong hands-on experience is the ultimate career enhancement; the proof, as they say, is in the pudding.

But the STMA membership survey found that 42 percent of its responding members held bachelor's degrees, 14 percent had associate's degrees and 13 percent had post-graduate degrees, while another 17 percent had at least some college.

That means the basic education bar is set fairly high for turf managers who aspire to rise in the profession. Add in the expected continuing education credit hours, and the need to pay attention to and take advantage of business and professional development opportunities is clear. ■

Diane Stafford is the workplace and careers columnist at The Kansas City Star. Her columns appear on Thursday and Sunday. In addition, Diane keeps up with the latest workplace news on her blog at www.workspacekc.typepad.com. She can be reached at stafford@kcstar.com.

STMONEY promotes "sports and the environment" collaboration

The Sports Turf Managers of New York (STMONEY) has launched a project on their website (<http://stmoney.org>) in collaboration with the New York team of the Global Sports Alliance (GSA). This new feature is called the GREEN Corner and focuses on up-to-date "sports and the environment" news and information as well as reports on GSA activities.

The Global Sports Alliance is an official partner of the United Nations Environment Program. Their mission is to promote environmental awareness and action among sports enthusiasts. The web page states, "In the coming months, STMONEY and GSA-NY will work toward strengthening this collaboration and forging a partnership in recognition of our shared commitment to 'consider the environment' in the management of sports facilities."—from Kevin Trotta, head groundskeeper, North Rockland Central School District.



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