

Getting ahead: education, experience both count a lot

Continuing education has become an essential part of the sports turf industry. As more attention is focused on the safety and playability of athletic fields and job competition increases, it is important that sports turf managers continue to develop professionally to meet their own goals and the standard required at their facility.

Continuing education benefits both the sports turf manager and their employer. Sports turf managers can move up the ladder in the workplace, receive promotions (and salary increases), and become a more valuable employee. In turn, the employer has a highly skilled worker/workforce that can perform a variety of tasks and possesses various skills.

The sports turf industry is constantly evolving

with new research, methodology, field science, and products. Therefore, it is more important than ever for sports turf managers to be at the forefront and take advantage of continuing education opportunities.

Editor's note: Kristen interviewed three veteran STMA members on what qualities they look for when hiring turf managers. Here are the responses:



Jess Evans, Episcopal HS, Alexandria, VA

I feel the value of both education and industry experience as equal measures on the scale, both eventually will add up to a competent, well versed and valued employee. In the past I have hired experienced sports field managers and skilled laborers who can jump right in with very little training which of course is good, as well as recent college graduates with all the current knowledge that comes with our very specific and detailed sports field industry, specifically turfgrass management and how important soil composition is to growing quality sports turf.

The experienced guy was able to draw on the work he had done in the past, offering suggestions and ideas on things that worked for him, while the college grad, not having the hands-on experience offered additional ideas related to the specifics of soils, drainage, design and the always evolving sport grass trials.



My ideal candidate has have the following, in this order: 1) passion, he or she has to love what they do; 2) commitment, they have committed to the work, the finished product and our industry; 3) personality, I need to see excitement in their work ethic which means they need to constantly bring something to the table, ideas and suggestions to make work better, more productive, more pro-active; and 4) perseverance, they have to work hard, give me 110% everyday. That's all any superintendent can ask for.

My ideal candidate possesses the ability to be a part of a team, share with the team as well as learn from the team.

If I have done my homework there should be no issues with new employees' positive attitude and work productivity. Right now I'm thankfully batting 100%.

The only other criteria I can think of is honesty and dedication; collectively these attributes give me one heck of a sports field manager which I think all of us in the industry would be proud to have on our team.

Abby McNeal, CSFM, Wake Forest University

It is hard to place a value on either education or experience when they both add to the person. I have personally liked a balanced individual who has some education and experience. It allows them to understand turf science basics, answers the whys of certain maintenance tasks and then their experience only helps them put their knowledge to work and expand them professionally.

Having some of both just provides more than just hands-on experience and leaning. A person can take book knowledge and learn how to practically use it as a base to start from and then grow into where their knowledge is used for each situation.

What skills and personality qualities does the ideal candidate possess?

My ideal candidate possesses the ability to be a part of a team, share with the team as well as learn from the team. Create a plan as a group and learn from all situations as to how to be better the next time. Flexibility in our

industry is critical because things are always changing, just like the weather, so you have to be able to adapt and overcome in any situation.

Thinking outside their "turf box" is also important. Too often our turf vision becomes cluttered and we need to "re-look" and that is an important feature or we may miss something that the turf is telling us.

You have to take a chance on a candidate and set goals for them and evaluate in 3-6 month intervals during their first year. If you

as a supervisor do not take some ownership in helping them become the employee that you are looking for then you haven't done your job. You need to provide them with opportunities during this evaluation time period that allows you to see what their true potential is and that will help them become a better turf manager. Just like we strive for value they need to know that they are valued as part of the group.

I always ask them to tell me what they like least about the job, what excites them about the job. This allows me to understand where their strengths and weakness are and how I can best fit them into the maintenance program. This also tells me more than what's on their resume or application. Ross Kurcab, my boss with the Broncos, always said, "Happy cows make better milk" and this is true but you need to know what makes an employee happy so that they will give you more effort when it's needed. Everyone is an individual and you need to remember that so you can try to provide a fun and exciting work environment, its helps a lot during the long days when there is too much to get done.

Jerad Minnick, Maryland Soccer Foundation

The value of education versus experience is the most challenging piece to differentiate between candidates when hiring. There is really no correct answer. Education is extremely important to me, as a lead assistant

needs the turfgrass background and tools to understand the science behind my management plans. But I have had great success with non-science educated managers too, as I have been able to teach and facilitate them learning the science that I use daily.

Experience is just as vital, even if not more though. If a candidate has limited experience operating mowers, tractors, aerators, spraying equipment, etc., then they are not prepared to be an assistant. They need to spend another season or two as a crew member or intern to gain the experience they need to better manage crews and fields.

My ideal candidate will always possess the hunger and desire to learn more each and every day. We work with science and people, and both science and dealing with people is always evolving. So, they will not be successful without an open mind. Also, I look for someone that has a passion for the work they do. Managing high-level fields isn't a job it's a way of life. So the people who catch my attention are ones that truly enjoy sports turf management and enjoy working with people.

I have had no trouble at all recognizing if a candidate will be productive and positive. Productive, "get it done" type of people are always positive. Positive people exude friendliness and generally smile a lot, even when they are nervous in an interview. They make statements from a "glass half full" view of life, using words like "can" and "will", and never use the "can't". They give the positive experiences of their past employments and spend little to no time on the negative aspects.

Generally the positive and productive gauge will separate a majority of candidates for a position. I personally am appreciative of a person who has goals and aspirations of being more than an assistant, as their drive toward those goals will make them much more productive. Yet there is a "happy medium," because the right person will be humble and understand that their learning and maturation process should be based in always having an open mind and respecting all of their peers and managers, whether they agree with the decisions being made or not. ■

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