

# Where Is Your **Diamond** in the Rough?



*Finding — and keeping — qualified and motivated employees may seem like a never-ending challenge for your business. But it doesn't have to be!*

**BY KEITH BEMERER**

**L**ately, at the Cincinnati Flower Growers Association meetings, I've been hearing the growers talk about one thing: finding employees for their businesses. Each month many members discuss how hard it is to find qualified young adults with a sense of work and will in their horticulture-based companies. Should it be this hard? Absolutely not! Is it possible to find an employee that could be the gold standard for your company for years to come? Yes!

Jim Hansel, career specialist with the Great Oaks Career Campuses here in Cincinnati, Ohio, recently conducted a survey of his students and industry employers on what to expect out of a horticulture job. Nearly 43% of the industry responded that when hiring employees, having a “get the job done” attitude is the No. 1 thing they are looking for, while students rated attitude (19%) as the No. 1 thing they can offer employers. On the other hand, 5% of industry respondents ranked someone with creative ideas as the highest desired trait, whereas 35% of students selected this as their No. 1 trait they can offer an employer. A disconnect is occurring at a higher level in our horticulture industry, and it seems to be degrading at a lightning pace at a time when full-time, educated workers are needed at all levels.

What if, however, you have a “diamond in the rough?” Is it clear to see the potential in someone who is starting out at age 15 or 16 and shape them into a qualified grower by 22 or 23 years old? Can you make a youth your right-hand person, regardless of their generational background or if

they are family? Can you work with someone who is buried in their phone and headphones? I think that finding this one person, is possible if you look for the right signs.

## **A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

On the west side of Cincinnati is a community called Delhi Township, “The Floral Paradise of Ohio.” In the early 1920s up until 1940s the 10-square-mile township had over 50 greenhouse operations, a lot by today's standards (that's an average of five greenhouse operations per square mile). Today, in 2020, there are fewer than 10 greenhouse businesses left. One of those greenhouses, West Hills Greenhouses, a “mom and pop” wholesale greenhouse owned by Roger and Linda Feist, is where I started my career in horticulture. I was recruited in 1997 after my dad (who was friends with Roger when he was younger) mentioned that I liked helping in the yard and garden. I was only a sophomore in high school.

I started out filling pots and weeding, and eventually worked my way up to sticking unrooted zonal and ivy geranium, new guinea impatiens, and poinsettia cuttings. At the time, I could only work 18 hours a week, but once I turned 18, I could work more. Each year, I learned more and more about the business — every square inch of greenhouse and the customers that came in. I worked with a very diverse crowd of other people and full-time employees who left when I arrived. During my senior year of high school, I applied to The Ohio State University to study floriculture. I was

accepted and graduated from high school, and finished my workdays during the summer of 2000 with West Hills. In 2004, I did a 12-week internship with John Woodman of Darby Creek Growers in Orient, Ohio, learning more about the fast pace of large-scale operations and using more advanced automation.

I graduated from Ohio State and interviewed with several companies, but could not find a solid lead on my job search. I returned home and went back to work for West Hills in 2004, promising to work for 10 months to get them through the winter and spring in hopes of finding a different job and starting my career. Ten years later, I was still working for them, doing everything from accounting, growing, spraying, sales, greenhouse maintenance, deliveries and pesticide management — with more responsibilities, and work ethic, being further developed yearly. I was nominated and selected as treasurer of the Cincinnati Flower Growers during this time, opening my presence up to other local growers and vendors — far from my goal of 10 months. That is, until I walked in to the OFA Short Course trade show (now AmericanHort Cultivate) and my cell phone rang. A greenhouse manufacturer, Rough Brothers Inc., wanted to offer me a job. My experience at West Hills doing accounting, my contacts with others in CFGA, and wholesaling, made me an ideal candidate for their inside sales position.

### STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN

What makes your best employee *the best*? Is it how fast they are getting their work done? Punctuality? Ability to work with others? While you capitalize on this trait, you could be alienating your company from potential new hires who have different traits that you need in your organization. Make a list of the traits that you want to see in a good

employee and a list of those you don't. Tailor your interviews around asking questions on your good traits list.

For example, maybe you are looking for someone who is good at organization and speed. Possible questions to ask would be, "What is your typical day like?" and follow up with, "How do you handle your day if your schedule is interrupted?" This way, if you are looking for someone who can work on a transplant line but can be easily pulled for a watering task, less conflict could occur.

### BE MINDFUL

Sometimes you need to step out of your comfort zone as an employer. Gone are the days of writing a simple "Help Wanted" ad. If you really want to engage with students, consider asking local schools and science teachers if you can come in to talk about horticulture and plants. By reaching out early, you may be jump starting not only a good student but a future worker in the industry. It's amazing how many times I've talked to students and one or two will follow up with questions afterward. This is a chance to ask if they have or need a job. These students, if driven in the right direction, can have the training wheels you installed and push them down the path to be your right hand.

When people applied for a job at West Hills, we would measure how fast a candidate would keep up with walking to meet with someone else in the greenhouse while someone watched their mannerisms. If a candidate's head was on a swivel, or fell behind, we knew that person would not have the energy to keep up with us. However, if they kept up, moved or even asked legitimate questions about the job, we knew we had a solid lead. This was a great way to narrow a pool of 10 candidates down to a few individuals.



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**TECHNOLOGY: A HELP, NOT A HINDRANCE**

I hear another issue all too common: Cell phones and headsets. While many have banned or even dismissed employees over using them, can employees still use and be productive? Absolutely. One

grower I've talked to lets his high school students control his social media presence (with approval, of course) by letting them snap pictures for Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. He ended up doing his own internal marketing campaign, and no longer needed

an outside source for his garden center. The students also helped add Google AdWords, which increases search functionality and reach.

Another grower has mentioned that a young person he hired for watering ended up being more

tech savvy, and so was promoted to inside sales and booking cuttings and plugs, as they could do it faster and more efficiently.

Employers not only saved money and time but allowed for employees to be themselves, improved the business and freed up time for the owner to do more important tasks. How did they find this? They stepped outside the box and found a desirable trait they were not looking for! This allowed for creativity AND a "get the job done" attitude at the same time. You will find that some of the best younger employees are better at technology than you think, which could lead to better understanding of the innovations our industry uses daily — at a time when technology and social media use increasing among all generations.

**THE BEST OF THE BEST**

Don't forget to make sure when you hire a new employee you tell them up front what they will be doing. Some employees come into a greenhouse immediately thinking they are going to be a grower or transplanter, but end up pulling weeds. You want that new person to end their first day with a positive attitude, and excited to come back the next day energized and ready to go! Have new employees shadow an existing employee to show them the ropes. You may find out quickly that they have a set of skills that you didn't realize they had or can take over a task if someone is ill or needed somewhere else.

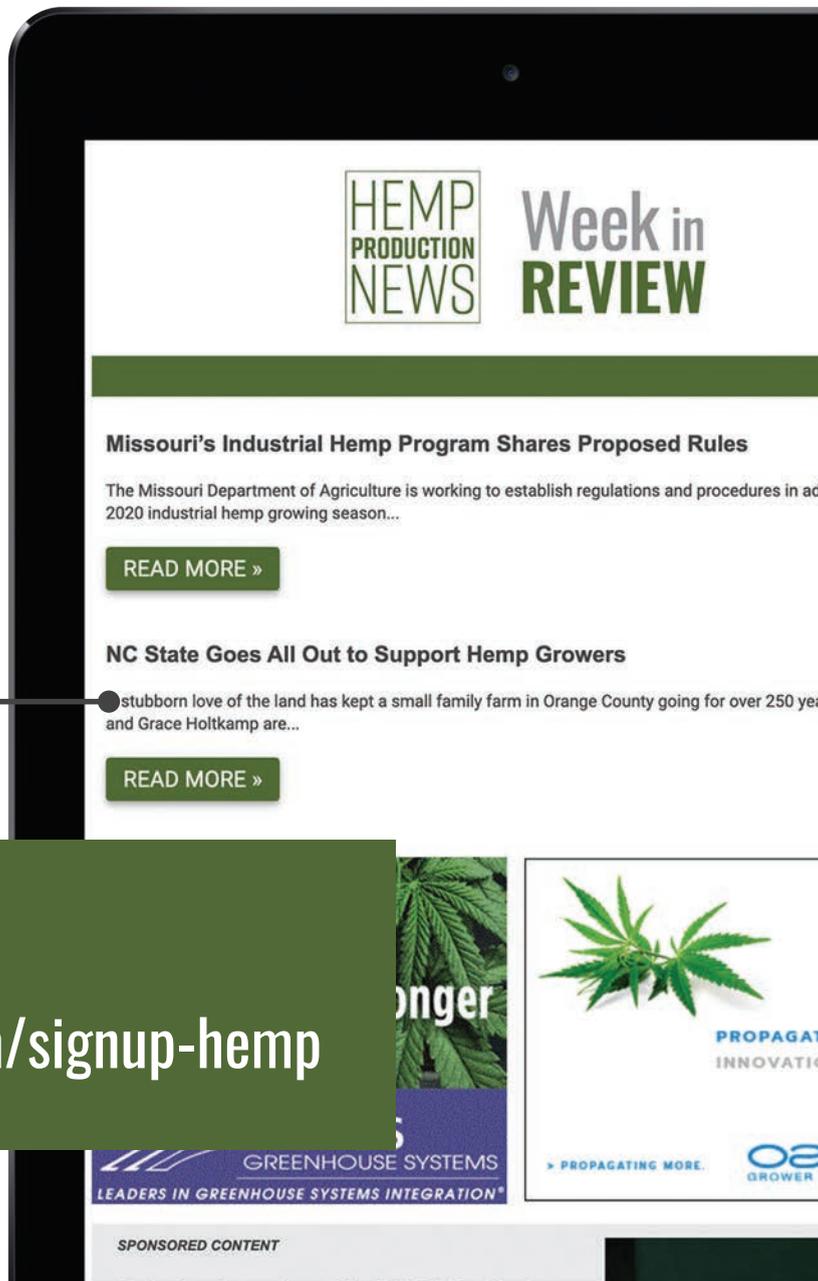
Ask any employee, inside or outside our industry, and morale is still important. Every now and then, employees need to be told they are doing a good job. If you are working long hours or late nights, sometimes even a good meal helps to let them know you care. Make sure to take breaks and reiterate that the goal of the day was met, or areas you could work on to make that goal 100%. In that way, your diamond in the rough will be a tough, hard worker ready to help your company continue to grow and develop a relationship to count on them time and time again. Each day, I remember I was just a 15 year old filling pots; tomorrow I know I will make a difference helping others. [gpn](#)

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