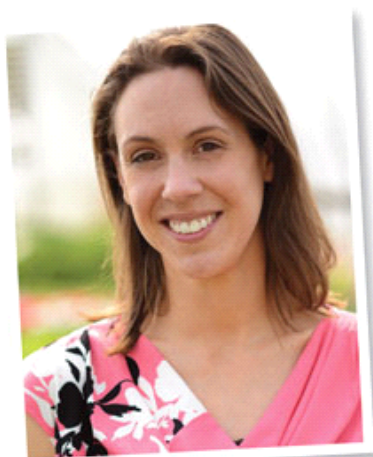


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The Perfect Storm

Jennifer Polanz



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The spring has come and gone, and the season had its ups and downs, but one concern that knows no bounds is labor. Normally in this space I talk about the stories you can find in this issue (and you should definitely check these stories out), but the topic of labor is a pressing one that I'd like to highlight. Initially, we were seeing labor crunches on the supply side with growers having difficulty finding the workers they need. Now, however, we're starting to see it on the retail side as well, which makes that six-week crunch time in spring even more difficult.

I talked to some retailers and a hiring expert to break it down, looking for where the issue is. The problem seems to be a convergence of multiple issues causing the lack of qualified workforce, aka, the perfect storm.

First, the unemployment rate is at 3.9% as of April, the lowest rate since December 2000. You can't hire if people don't need jobs. The people who do

need jobs are balking at working in our industry, too. According to Seed Your Future, an initiative designed to get more students interested in horticulture (we'll touch on that in a bit), only 61% of open jobs in horticulture are filled each year, leaving workforce gaps.

About those kids not choosing horticulture as a career: Seed Your Future identifies declining education programs as a major challenge for our industry. In fact, according to their statistics, most schools stop teaching plant-based concepts by third grade and 0% of middle schoolers in the Seed Your Future focus groups had heard of the word "horticulture."

A more pressing matter today is current immigration policy, which is resulting in a reduced legal seasonal workforce returning to the U.S. to work difficult labor jobs, particularly on the landscape side. A record number of businesses requested H-2B workers and only 33,000 were granted through the lottery. The omnibus spending package authorized more, but as of press time those visas had not yet been released.

So what's the solution? I don't have the key to leveling up with great, new employees, but I do have some suggestions. We have to make our industry more attractive to potential workers. When unemployment is so low, it's a worker's market, so-to-speak. We have to get serious about offering real incentives that will attract real talent.

The other option is to invest in automation and reduce the need for real people. That could mean more interactive technology, better use of automation in the greenhouse and more efficient watering techniques. Find your pain

points when it comes to employment and figure out how to automate it.

You're still going to need warm bodies, so you might need to hire people with little or no experience and train them up yourself. One of the experts I spoke with, Suzanne Kludt, does hiring for Al's Garden & Home in the Portland, Oregon, area, as well as runs a business called HireHorticulture.com. She told me they had trouble finding quality applicants until they changed the campaign from "Now Hiring" to "Now Training Horticulturists," which attracted better candidates.

We'll keep finding better ways to recruit and train employees, and get them in the magazine. Meanwhile, let me know what worked for you this year when hiring and share your hiring woes, too (it's therapeutic). Email me at jpolanz@ballpublishing.com. **GP**