



Can't Find Good Help?

by John A. Berglund

How do you find good help these days? Frustrated contractors ask this question every day while wringing their hands at a botched job. Their troubles would disappear, they think, if only they could find good help.

I've been working in construction for over 15 years as owner of a small company — one house a year and a couple of remodeling projects — and I've never had any trouble finding good help. I think one reason for my success is that I came into construction after spending several years in education. As a teacher, I realized that you rarely *find* good students — you *cultivate* them. Just as many poor students are a product of poor teachers, the problem of finding good help may rest not with the employees, but with the employer.

If the Shoe Fits

I recently had the opportunity to test this theory when my wife and I moved to another city so she could go back to school for an advanced degree. I decided to look for work with contractors in the area instead of establishing another business. Two years later, I've gained some insight into the employer/employee dilemma from the point of view of the "good help."

The first job I found came about while I was doing some projects for my landlord. A contractor neighbor noticed that I didn't drop my hammer very often and that I finished my projects with a degree of professionalism. When he asked if I'd like to work for him, I said I'd give it a try.

I soon discovered that my new employer had no communication skills whatsoever. He knew what was supposed to happen on site, but no one else on the job did. I had no schedule, no punchlist, no work order — he didn't even walk me through the job. I was left to fend for myself with no clear guidance from my boss on how to deal with owners and subs who had agendas of their own.

I got my next job by answering a newspaper ad for an "experienced finish carpenter." In the interview, I was asked if I had any experience with electrical work. When I replied that I had wired several residences, I was asked if I could wire the new showroom and office complex. Better yet, could I act as project manager for the whole 13-story office building they were constructing? I told them they needed a magician, not a finish carpenter, and that was the end of the interview.

A couple of months later, this outfit was under new management, and they called me again for work as a finish carpenter. This time I took the job, but things hadn't changed much. I became their "fire fighter" — my main job was to keep several of their clients from taking them to court. The project manager confided that the company didn't have a single job from a referral — every job in progress came from the sales staff.

Just before I quit, I found myself running a 90-pound jackhammer in a French drain. I'm no whiner, but why would anyone put their oldest, most expensive employee in the least demanding job?

I'm sure both of these former employers of mine are still crying because they can't find good help. They still don't recognize that the problem is in the way they run their business.

Signs of Trouble

How can you determine if your policies — or lack of them — are the cause of your labor problems? One symptom is employee referrals that don't work out. If you can't find someone to work for you from all the people you meet on a daily basis — material suppliers, subs, golf partners, fishing buddies, former clients, other builders — then the problem might not be a shortage of good help.

Another symptom is employees who leave to work for someone else or to start their own businesses. Sometimes this is the result of a personality clash.

But often people leave because they believe their chances for improvement are limited in their current job. An entry-level employee needs to be given an opportunity to gain working experience; otherwise they soon come to believe they're in a dead-end job. Experienced, highly skilled employees, on the other hand, are dying to take on more responsibility. If you don't give them the chance to move up, it amounts to inviting them to move along.

Do's and Don'ts

From an employee's perspective, here's a list of actions and attitudes to avoid if you want to keep good help.

1. Don't tell everyone you're not making money, and then show up in your new Cherokee.
2. Don't blame workers for material shortages if you don't bring them what they ask for.
3. Don't send the crew to project B when they just got rolling on project A.
4. Don't send the crew back to A when they just got B organized.
5. Don't ask for overtime if you don't want to pay for it.
6. Don't give the crew one day's notice that you're out of work.
7. Don't send workers to the site with no instructions and expect your foreman to keep them busy.
8. Don't expect carpenters to pack all of their tools just because you failed to tell them what kind of work they would be doing.
9. Don't ask employees to take pride in their work when you tell them to save money by using salvaged materials.
10. Don't expect your employees to read your mind.

Before your employees decide it's time for them to find a new employer, review your procedures to see if you're doing enough to make them want to

continue working for you. Here's a list of *Do's* to follow if you want to find and keep good help.

1. Be there when you say you will.
Provide at least a simple schedule and prioritize it. That way, when a problem occurs and you can't solve it immediately, the crew can go on to something else.
2. Give someone authority to pick up and charge materials from suppliers. Most good help will gladly take responsibility for this, but they need to be trusted.
3. Leave the crew with one person in charge. The site boss should have authority to make job-related decisions, including sending people home for the day if there isn't enough work.
4. Provide a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for employees that lists expectations, dress code, rules about using the radio and smoking on the job, standard work hours, overtime pay, and anything else that will make the employee's job easier. A long list won't scare away a good employee.
5. Let your employees know what kind of work they'll be doing so they can bring the tools they need to complete the work. Otherwise, they have to pack and unpack everything they own every day.
6. Tell the crew when things are going well and the owners are happy with progress and workmanship.
7. Encourage employees with a bonus, even if it's just a small tool allowance. You can write off the expense, and your employees will take better care of the tools because they own them.
8. Let employees know what work they should *not* perform on the site. Otherwise, your crew will have no way to avoid doing the owner's list of handyman tasks.
9. Establish a regular schedule for reviewing employee performance and giving raises.
10. Tell employees in advance when work will run out. Most construction workers expect slowdowns, but they need to plan for them. ■

John Berglund, formerly a builder in northern California, is looking for a good employer in Honolulu, Hawaii.