

STATE OF THE MARKET: SNOW LABOR

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Jordan Smith
Liquid Technology Marketing Manager,
BOSS Snowplow

“ AS WE MOVE FORWARD, THE SNOW AND ICE INDUSTRY IS POISED TO BECOME A BEACON OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ECONOMIC PRUDENCE.”

LEADING THE CHARGE

The snow and ice removal industry is currently navigating a transformative phase, with a heightened focus on chloride and liability reduction for snow contractors as well as state and municipal snow organizations. The industry has seen a push toward the use of liquid deicing due to both regulatory and customer demand, a shift that could potentially reduce chloride pollution by a staggering 75%.

Liquid deicers are gaining favor due to their proactive nature, which is a stark contrast to the more reactive approach employed by using rock salt. This proactive approach is a significant factor in the industry's drive for liability reduction. The environmental implications are equally compelling. A mere teaspoon of salt can permanently pollute five gallons of fresh water, underscoring the urgency to protect our most vital resource.

The economic implications are also hard to ignore. With construction and infrastructure costs skyrocketing over the past four years, the need to safeguard these investments is more critical than ever. It's a sobering fact that each ton of salt, costing less than \$100, can inflict between \$800 and \$3,000 of long-term damage when applied to commercial properties, bridges, parking garages or roadways. This stark reality underscores the necessity of exploring salt and chloride reduction strategies to mitigate long-term costs.

Leading the charge in this industry-wide shift is BOSS Snowplow. BOSS is spearheading efforts to increase information, education and accessibility to top-tier equipment for applying liquids. This includes the full VSI by BOSS Snowplow product line and the Snowrator® and SR MAG. This initiative is not just about business growth; it's about the greater good of the industry and our planet, helping you RESTORE ORDER, sustainability and efficiency.

As we move forward, the snow and ice industry is poised to become a beacon of environmental responsibility and economic prudence. With the continued push for liquid deicing and the tireless efforts of companies like BOSS Snowplow, we are on the cusp of a more sustainable and responsible future.

ELEVATE YOUR LIQUID



Increase efficiencies and strengthen your margins when you Elevate Your Liquid IQ and introduce liquids to your fleet.



SAVE TIME



SAVE LABOR



SAVE MONEY



SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

ELEVATE YOUR LIQUID IQ



WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

VSI
by BOSS SNOWPLOW

A frosty outlook on labor is slowly warming up for snow and ice management professionals.

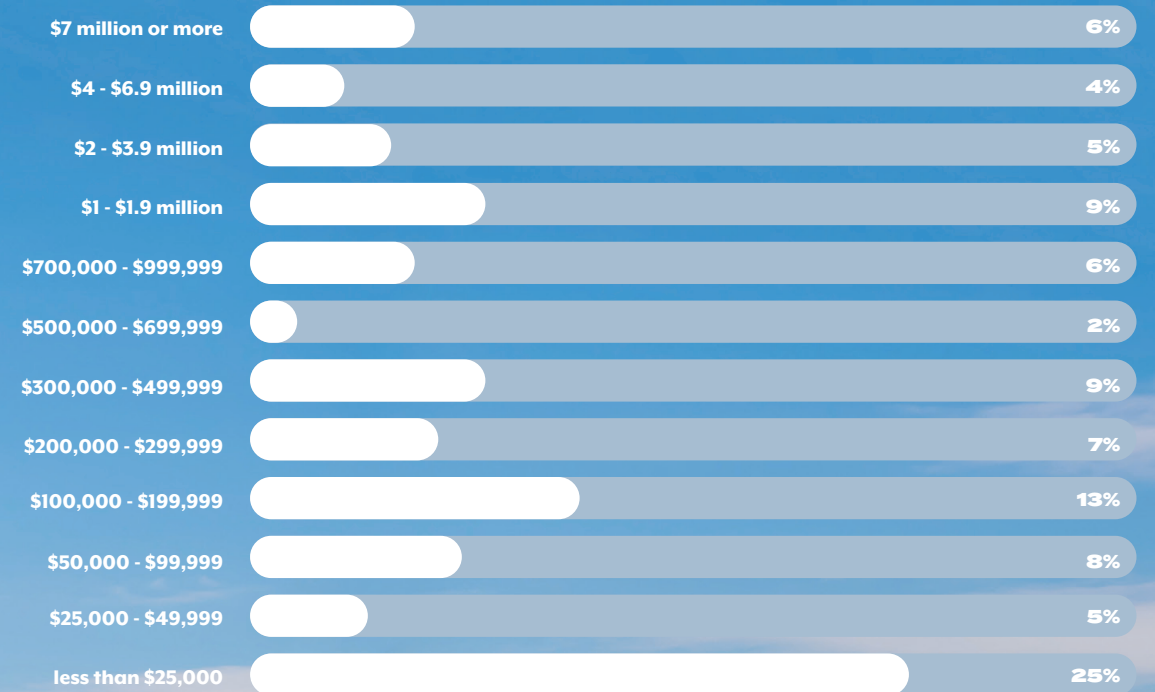
Hiring new employees remains tricky after COVID-19. Still, it seems snow and ice management professionals aren't as far behind as they reported in previous State of the Market reports.

In fact, they're largely putting the finishing touches on winter prep: 60% of contractors are confident they'll be fully staffed by the first billable snow event, and roughly 73% of respondents are fully staffed or less than five hires away.

That's not to say finding those employees is easy. 60% of respondents still say the labor market is worse than it was after COVID-19. However, it's encouraging that the number of respondents say it's worse is falling: There were 68% last year and 80% two years ago.

—Jimmy Miller, associate editor, Lawn & Landscape

What was your Winter 2022-23 snow and ice revenue?



HELP ON THE FROSTY FRONT

STAYING STEADY

Finding labor has long been a challenge, but companies offering snow services are acting creatively to make it work.

By Jimmy Miller

BOB WAMBACH UNDERSTANDS WHY it's tough to find quality employees to work every winter.

Wambach, who works in sales and design at Proscapes in Madison, Wisconsin, couldn't make thousands of dollars on YouTube when he first entered the work force. He couldn't drive Uber or drop off food for DoorDash, either. When possible, employees could work from their own homes or cars, it's a hard sell to get them out at four in the morning shoveling snow.

"The kid who doesn't want to wash dishes or bartend now isn't lazy — he just has options," Wambach says. Plus, when the labor market is short on salaried positions, he says the problem is amplified. "If you can't find someone for a full-time job," Wambach says, "how are you going to find someone to work only when it snows?"

Still, snow events roll on as they always have, ensuring the need for good, qualified employees who can keep sidewalks salted and parking lots cleared. Wambach and other landscape contractors who offer snow and ice services every winter are tasked with finding employees. It's easier said than done.

"We get a lot of people who say they've been behind the wheel of a truck, and it's pretty easy to tell quickly they don't have the experience," says Scot Williams, the general manager at GLS Maintenance and Landscaping in Oak Ridge, North Carolina. "They want big dollars, but they don't have the experience we need as a professional company."

So, a tight labor market forces landscapers to act creatively to find diamonds in the rough ahead of this winter season. For some landscapers and snow contractors, it's a matter of looking inward and making the job as worth it as it can be. For others, it's best to look outside and subcontract the work.

How many hourly employees do you have for snow and ice services?

26%

25 or more

4%

20-24

9%

15-19

17%

10-14

16%

5-9

28%

Less than 5



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PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSS



Do you have an employee recruiting and retention strategy in place for your snow and ice management operations?

YES
38%

NO
62%

TEACHING THE TALENT. Wambach doesn't necessarily lament the "good old days," but he does acknowledge things used to be easier. Recruitment wasn't so tricky. Wage-wise, employees could be brought in at \$20 an hour — now it's closer to \$30 or \$35. And his employees used to have more accommodating schedules, even offering to stay onboard from the winter season into the spring. Now, a good chunk of his employees have other jobs — snow work is just an add-on for them to make ends meet.

Even the storms seem to be different, as anecdotally, Wambach says the work used to be done well before the traffic seemed to pick up.

"I don't know if it's because I have a romantic view of historic storms," he says, "but now it seems like every storm seems to start at 6 a.m. right before rush hour."

Still, Wambach has managed to amass 60 employees for snow season behind a career ladder that shows specific steps on how to make more money. It doesn't take long for employees to build some momentum, either — the Labor 1, Labor 2 and Labor 3 steps could take about a month, and the employee earns \$1 more per hour for each step they climb.

Employees climb the ladder by completing video training on apps, filing the right paperwork and passing the exams on their phones. It's all about giving the employees more control over their earning power. Wambach says they're paying people 30% more than they were pre-COVID, but they're also stacking the jobsites with qualified labor.

"If you really apply yourself and want to do this as a career, you could become a fore-

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSS

THE ALL-IN-ONE SIDEWALK WARRIOR

Snowrator® and SR MAG are the right-size solutions for all your snow and ice business needs. Designed to pair versatility with force, these solutions are equipped with the tools you need and the accessories you want to clear the sidewalks you service.

Accessories sold separately.



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BRX48 Broom

TGS 85 Spreader

MAG

SNOWRATOR

EXACT PATH

20-Gallon Auxiliary Tank



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TIME SAVER

Brine, spread and plow at the same time to maximize on-the-job productivity and profitability.



MONEY SAVER

Maximize on-the-job profitability and reduce labor costs.

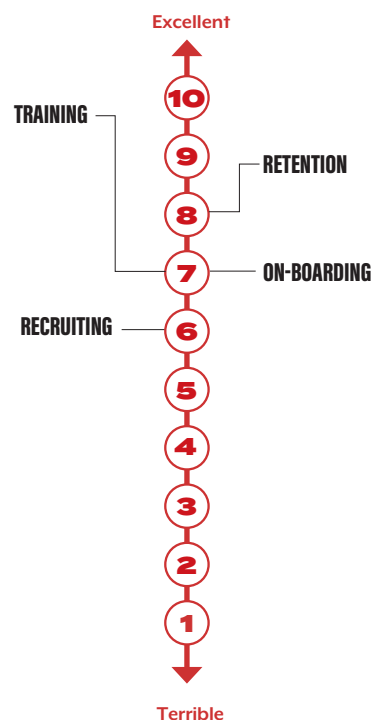


"I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S BECAUSE I HAVE A ROMANTIC VIEW OF HISTORIC STORMS, BUT NOW IT SEEMS LIKE **EVERY STORM SEEMS TO START AT 6 A.M.**

RIGHT BEFORE RUSH HOUR."

— **Bob Wambach**

Rank how well you do the following
(10 being excellent; 1 terrible)



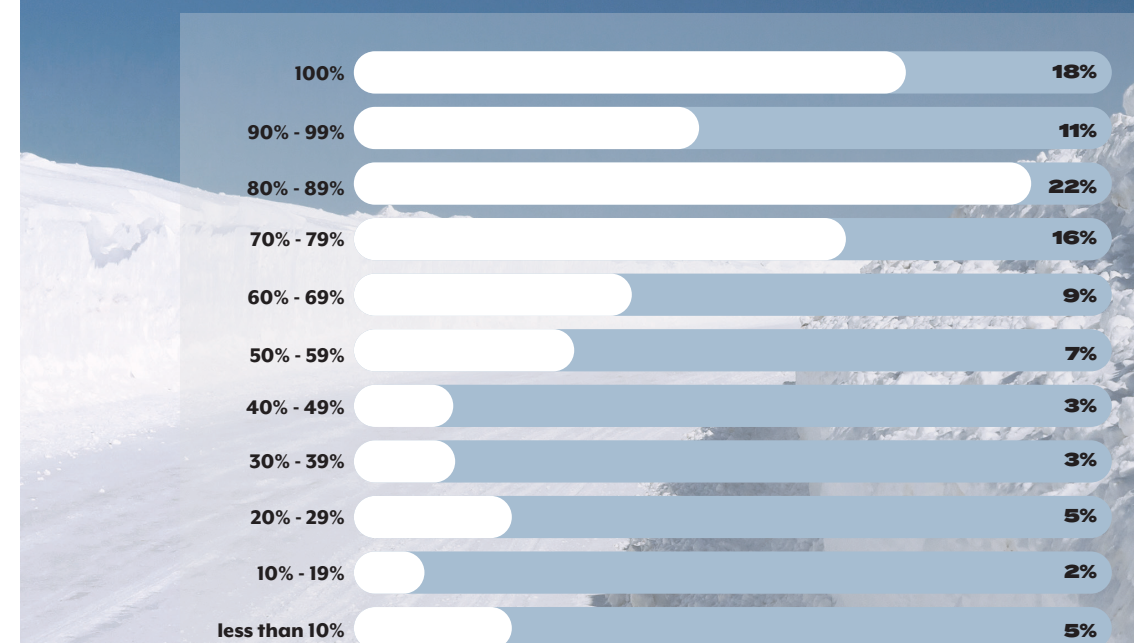
man within a year," he says. "Nowadays, I don't care if I have three foremen on site. The job goes faster. It makes everything go smoothly if the customer's over the moon."

Of course, the training programs don't always need to be as formal. Venessa Anderson runs Alaska Premier Services, which does lawn care, maintenance and snow services in Anchorage. Every winter presents the daunting task of training new employees.

Anderson admits that's scary, and in an effort to find the best labor possible, she's raised her starting wage 16% this year and they're subcontracting out necessary work, so they meet necessary safety standards.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BOSS

What is the average retention rate for hourly employees in your snow and ice management operation in the last 12 months?



Damage happens, and Anderson's trying to get ahead of that as much as possible. The worst is when they hit a garage door and bust it up, but it's also common to dig up lawns by accident or bust up bricks along a retaining wall.

But her husband and co-owner takes new employees out in the truck to coach them on the controls, angles and how hard they want to hit a pile. Anderson says it's about six to eight snow events before those employees have got a good handle on what they're doing.

"When they've demonstrated that knowledge, then they're sent out on their own," she says.

PHOTO © V.J. MATTHEW/ADOBE STOCK

SUBBING FOR STARS. All four contractors interviewed for this story say they look outside their company to complete some work, including Cody Rindlisbacher, the owner of CPR Services in Utah. The company's motto is that they'll revive one property at a time, and with four employees including himself, they can only run two trucks during the winter — one does the snow plowing and another does shoveling and salting.

"Previously, it has been myself and my brother. We haven't had any other employees," Rindlisbacher says. "We've always needed employees, but with the labor market, we just haven't been able to find anybody or keep anybody around. This year

we started working with a temp agency."

The jury's still out on how much it'll affect CPR's bottom line, but Rindlisbacher says they previously passed up doing some work like walkways because they couldn't handle it with how much parking lot space they had to clear. They also could only offer winter services as an upsell to existing clients who work with them in the summer, but now, for the first time in eight years, they can sell it to brand new clients, too.

Back in North Carolina, Williams says their employee count jumps to 80 or 90 people once they factor in how many people are subbed in for the commercial snow season. "We have agreements with

STATE OF THE MARKET:
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LABOR**

several companies for labor, so we pull from there,” he says. “It is quite hard to find good people.”

Williams just wants to avoid the headache of realizing an employee isn’t as qualified as they promised while they’re out in the field in the middle of a snow storm. “We’re in a crunch situation when it comes to snow,” he says. So, he always plants at least three experienced employees at each jobsite, ensuring someone can handle the most dangerous or costly parts of the job in a pinch. They’ll then task the other laborers with stand-on machines with brooms or baggers, as they can’t tear up asphalt doing that. “For the next event, we just won’t have that person,” Williams says.

Williams does think there’s been an overall mindset change since COVID-19, but he can’t put his finger on what’s made it possible for people who can no longer collect government checks to stay away from working.

“I’m not really sure what these people are doing. The money’s not there anymore,” Williams says, adding he doesn’t believe it’s just something happening in his region. “I think it’s everybody. I think it’s a lack of willing to work.”

Wambach may disagree with why there are less laborers, but he’s also had to sub out some work in some cases. He’s mindful to select subs that don’t require a change in management software. But while he prefers to find his own employees to handle the job, there are some zero tolerance accounts like hospitals and clinics that require particularly qualified labor.

And for her part, Anderson says they opened up divisions for subcontractors to apply for work, assigning routes to those with trucks and plows. This also helps cover her in the event an employee no-calls, no-shows. They’ve got about 20 employees this winter and three subcontractors.

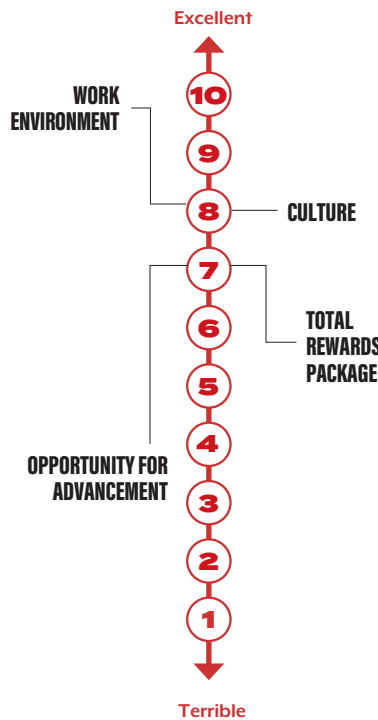
“If somebody quits or doesn’t show up, the route’s still getting done,” she says.

KEEPING THE BEST. Of course, it’s not always possible to sub out the work.



**Rate the following
about your organization**

(10 being excellent; 1 terrible)



Wambach says his recruiting strategy has remained intensive but hasn’t changed much, even as the effectiveness has dropped. They’re no longer using job apps because that’s where a majority of the laborers who would show up once and quit often came from.

Instead, the number one thing has been implementing the clear career ladder and,

of course, raising the wage. But there are other things companies can do to sell their positions to possible employees.

Wambach says a strong company culture has helped dramatically. He references a foreman who’s worked there for 23 years, and two more who have been there for 16 and 15 years apiece. He says his core group of foremen have a combined 100 years of experience between them.

Part of the sell to prospective employees is good work-life balance. Wambach has worked jobs before where if there’s a big snow event, those workers aren’t home for three days. Not at Proscapes: they’ve established a rotation where anyone who’s out there works in eight-hour rotations. “Nobody’s in a truck for 20 hours,” he says.

Plus, this carries over to the spring, too. They try to implement three-day weekends so folks can hang out with their friends and family outside work. And high-performing employees are awarded with quarterly recognition like attending a local baseball game on the company’s dime.

Wambach says this comes down to hiring the right people. He allows some “boomerangs,” where employees leave the company once but come back after realizing they’ve left for a quick buck. But he only allows them to come back one time — he won’t permit it a second time.

“We don’t hire everybody,” he says. “We’re not doing the whole thing where if you can breathe in a mirror and fog shows up, we put you in the door.” **L&L**

The author is associate editor at Lawn & Landscape magazine.