



We are not done

by Bobby Winter, IANY President

As we near the end of navigating the 2023 seasons, it is appropriate to assess the success of the year. Overall, the season has been decent, despite the absence of the hot, dry summer experienced in the previous year.

Our team remained busy throughout the season, and many of us increased our rates while still maintaining a steady workload. While some may have lost clients due to price increases, it is worth noting that workmanship was not the issue.

northeast. The conference is highly informative and educational, regardless of the learning materials covered in classes.

In addition to attending the conference, the off-season provides an opportunity to evaluate our performance, identify areas that require improvement, and update equipment and tools. We must also prioritize the education and development of our staff, whether through online courses, training, or attending classes. Investing in our staff will help to transform our great helpers into great service technicians. It may also be necessary to per-

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As we head into the off-season, it is essential that we continue our education to improve our efficiency, profitability, and resilience for the 2024 season. The most crucial step we can take is to attend the Northeast Irrigation Expo and Conference in Connecticut on February 20th and 21st. Registration for NEIC just opened and IANY members received discounted rates. Visit www.cica.org to register.

This conference offers an opportunity to explore new products, engage with industry leaders, manufacturers, and educators, and connect with fellow contractors from the

form a review of our staff and eliminate those who do not meet our expectations.

Finally, we should take time to celebrate the holiday season with our loved ones and express gratitude for a successful season. I am excited about the opportunities that the off-season presents, and I look forward to seeing what the 2024 season holds.

Bobby Winter is owner of B&A Lawn Sprinklers and president of the Irrigation Association of New York.

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2024 Green Industry Outlook - Contractors

by Kyle Brown, Irrigation Association

The Irrigation Association's 2024 Green Industry Outlook – Contractors survey is more focused than ever on providing industry contractors with insights on how to prepare for the future and overcome obstacles.

Contractors faced another year where the work was there if they had the capacity, reined in largely by labor limitations. While many put more effort into finding new ways to bring in employees, it was a season of moderate growth and generally moderate expectations for the future.

Read the complete 2024 Green Industry Outlook - Contractors report by visiting www.irrigationlighting.org and viewing the November 2023 publication.

Growth and challenges

More than half of contractors believe that their businesses have had moderate to significant growth in the past year (56%), climbing to 63% if you're a contractor under the age of 40. That follows trends from last year, coming off of another season in which the market has tended to have more work available than the capacity to meet it in some regions. Whether a respondent had enough labor in the past year or not didn't significantly affect this result.

Even more overall (63%) expect that next year's growth in demand will continue, and for contractors under 40, that jumps to 80%. That's showing trust in the market, as most (70%) have projects planned through next June, but not beyond. For contractors under 40, 29% have projects scheduled through the end of 2024.

There's no question what most contractors see as their biggest challenge again this year: labor. Discussing barriers to growth, 72% point to labor availability and retention, with a 29% drop to the next highest response, economic conditions (43%). However, respondents who reported having enough labor for the past year led this list with economic conditions (55%), followed by labor (52%) and insurance (31%). Respondents who said they couldn't find enough labor pushed it even higher at 82%, followed by economic conditions (38%).

Labor also leads company expenses (82%), compared to second place, equipment, tools and materials (37%).

But opportunities are available, as most contractors (54%) expect smart irrigation technologies to impact their growth in the coming year. Irrigation contractors are even more confident, as 71% are watching smart irrigation closely,

about 20% higher than their next ranking, remote irrigation system management (47%).

A reliable crew

For the first time in three years, the number of contractors reporting that they're able to find enough qualified workers in their region to meet their needs (29%) has increased by more than 1%. In previous surveys, that number had held steady at about 25% year over year.

For the other group, most tend to say that local wages for similar work are too competitive (37%), before the issue

that potential employees aren't aware of career path options (35%). Other responses include a prohibitively high local cost of living for employees.

Some of the biggest changes in this year's survey come from how contractors are trying to bring in new employees and improve and maintain the crew they've got.

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That starts with the number of companies reporting a policy or program related to employee diversity (66%) as compared to last year (53%). More are encouraging additional licensing, certification and additional training (96%) over the previous survey's results (87%). Mentorship programs also increased significantly, with 46% reporting them as a part of their practices, up from 36%.

Most contractors offer monetary incentives (77%), and among the other options, a few of the "other" answers shared ideas like paid time off, four-day work weeks and a guaranteed hour minimum. Some also offer a footwear and clothing allowance, free education and training and company trucks. One of the classics of the industry, team and family barbecues, was also on the list.

Respondents who report having enough workers bring on at least a few more younger employees generally (89%) than those who don't (84%). They similarly encourage employee education and certification and offered very comparable pay and benefits. But for the second year running, respondents who found enough labor are more likely to have a mentorship or career path program (59%) at almost a 20% difference to those who say they didn't find enough workers (41%).

A focus on water

For whatever type of contractor they consider themselves, contractors report about 58% of their overall services involve irrigation. Irrigation contractors moved that up to 76%, still giving themselves room to bring in other revenue streams. Even those who describe themselves primarily as landscape contractors reached 34% on average.

Keeping on from last year, demand for irrigation services in general has remained the same (45%) down to the same percentage. Most expect moderate growth (46%) overall.

Almost all respondents say demand is either the same or increased for smart irrigation systems (90%), and even more expect it to hold steady or grow in the upcoming year (97%). Not a single irrigation contractor expects demand for smart irrigation products to decline in the next year.

That might partially stem from the fact that only about 1 in 3 customers are using smart controllers currently (37%). This is true even for irrigation contractors, who check in a bit higher (40%) as a group.

The majority of contractors report that water scarcity will either have little impact on their work or create new opportunities going forward (86%). Landscape contractors in particular expect scarcity to create new demand for irrigation products (53%) even more than irrigation contractors (41%).

The outlook

More than three-quarters (76%) of respondents are optimistic about the future of the industry at least to some degree. As might be expected, contractors under 40 are even more optimistic (94%) than the general group. No one in that age range was pessimistic about the future of the industry.

In general, contractors aren't looking to add new services in the upcoming year (33%). If they are, smart irrigation system upgrades top the list (25%), with landscape lighting right behind (24%).

The majority of respondents aren't planning on reducing any services for the upcoming year (77%). The few that are will typically be looking at lawn maintenance (6%) or snow and ice management (5%) as the most likely to go.

As far as investments in equipment and services go, the top three haven't changed from last year. Trucks still lead the list (46%) at nearly the same percentage, with construction equipment (35%) and battery-powered equipment (30%) within 4% of their totals from last year.

Kyle Brown is editor-in-chief of Irrigation & Lighting magazine, an Irrigation Association publication.

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Improving how you sell and renew irrigation service agreements

by Jeff Carowitz, Strategic Force Marketing

If you're in the irrigation contracting business and you don't offer service agreements, you're missing a huge opportunity. Or, if you offer agreements but don't have at least 75% of your service accounts on an agreement (or membership) program, you're missing out on a significant way to strengthen your company's profitability and customer loyalty.

Customers actually like service agreements. They like to pay once for a season's worth of proactive checkups and maintenance. They rest easier knowing you'll be there to take care of what's needed when it's needed.

Agreements make your operations run more smoothly. Because a big chunk of service visits (turn-ons, winterizations, summer checkups) are booked in advance, you get predictable activity for your service team. This allows you to route more effectively and organize your schedule more to your convenience. You'll have a few fewer frantic calls from customers because they already know they're on your schedule.

*Service agreements are good for you – and good for your customers.
Invest some time to make them a bigger part of your business.*

Agreements grow the re-sale value of your company. Most irrigation businesses are asset-light: a little inventory and some well-used equipment. When it comes time to sell your business, buyers often will set their offer based two things: 1) the size of your repeat customer base and 2) what they can clearly see is repeatable, profitable cash flow. It's simple: the more customers under agreement = the more your company is worth. Establishing service agreements allows you to demonstrate to an acquirer or to your bank that your business is worth their investment.

How can you be better at winning more renewals and convincing more of your clients to sign on for agreements?

1) Renew in fall, but offer new agreements all season. Experienced pros know the best time for renewals is when the customer has just finished an irrigation season, not in February before the season starts. Structure your renewals in the fall when the importance of an efficient system is top-of-mind.

To get new clients enrolled in a membership program, offer the opportunity to join at the time of a service visit. Train

your technicians to present your program – and consider compensating them a little extra for each customer they are able to enroll.

2) Let customers choose from multiple packages. The most successful contractors offer 2-3 package options that bundle start-up, winterization and in-season checkups to provide all of the routine maintenance needed. If you offer additional services (fertilization, aeration, landscape lighting maintenance) offer those as ala carte options too.

3) Add monitoring. With the success of Wi-Fi controllers, it's now possible to create a revenue-stream from monitoring services as well. Offer a bundle price for the hardware to add monitoring (usually a timer upgrade, completed during the winter) and an annualized monitoring cost (Typically \$150/season). Your service can cover monitoring for alarms (electrical and flow) and notifying the client of any potential need to send a technician, plus irrigation suspension during rainy weather.

4) Be persistent in your promotional communications. Don't rely on just one method to promote your service agreement / membership programs. Many homeowners ignore emails and text messages, but surprisingly will respond well to "old school" direct mail or direct phone calls. They're busy, so stay with the message. Don't give up until you've enrolled everyone.

5) Incentives motivate. Offer early-bird renewal discounts, because they work. They get customers motivated to write the check, because they don't want to "lose" the discount. Just plan them into your pricing structure in advance.

Bottom line: service agreements are good for you – and good for your customers. Invest some time to make them a bigger part of your business.

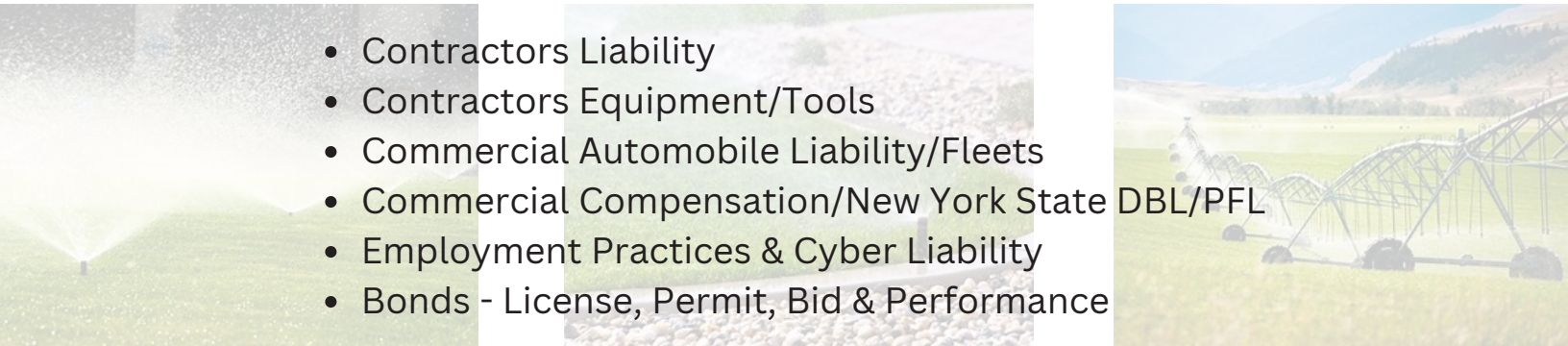
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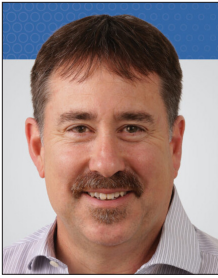
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Looking back, looking ahead

by Christopher Pine, CID, CIC, CLIA, CIT, MCLP, IrriTech Training

It is hard to believe that it is time for us to start getting ready for 2024. It seems like 2023 had all the makings for being a “way less than normal” type of year. But as I step back and look at it from a few different perspectives, it seemed to look a lot more “normal” than recent years. Here are a few thoughts on how that’s happened.

The economic forecasts for 2023 were erratic 12 months ago. My four years of economic study had me intrigued as with many real economists, since we’ve been largely treading in unknown territory. The potential for some drastic scenarios were believable when looking at historic economic trends and reactions.

As everything has turned out, many elements of the economy that were reacting to some of the extreme changes in the global economy the last few years (economies being shut down around the world, supply change disruptions due to change in demand, inflation resulting from huge injections of funds into economies, etc.) actually tended to slow and move back toward what is accepted as normal (at

least in North America), such as inflation, unemployment levels and economic growth.

Interestingly enough, the majority of economists are now predicting more of a “soft landing” with many of their models. Most of our landscape irrigation industry businesses benefitted tremendously from the economic activity during the pandemic, so this slowdown and return to more of a “normal” business pace and growth level seems to be happening in most geographic areas.

One thing that has consistently had a dramatic impact on our industry is the weather, and 2023 regularly reminded us of that. The only thing that we might be able to call “normal” with the weather of the past few years are extreme weather cycles and events. From areas with historic rains to drought to high and low temperatures, expecting and preparing for these events has become a necessary strategy for our industry.

Obviously, the presence of extreme weather impacts the ability to perform the work we do and the demand for

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what we do. It is also impacting the tools and technology that are changing our business. For example, the presence and function of weather sensors and those inputs into our irrigation controllers becomes more and more critical when managing irrigation systems today. Models that rely

So, what does 2024 look like and how can we in the irrigation industry prepare?

on “average” rainfall will obviously become less relevant with the extremes being so normal.

So, what does 2024 look like and how can we in the irrigation industry prepare? I believe 2024 might reflect more of what we are now accepting as “normal.” Economic models tend to align with some level of moderation. Consumer demand has flattened and hopefully interest rates will level off (or decrease!) and most models point to more consistency. Many contractors I interact with are largely seeing these trends and most are expecting the same.

There do seem to be some differences in the residential and commercial markets in many areas, which are seeing more strength in commercial projects. We are also seeing consistent demand in major renovations as more and more systems begin to show their age.

Probably the most consistent, universal challenge limiting companies’ growth is the availability, cost and development of our workforce. Regardless of geographic area or market segment, this is almost always one of industry’s primary challenges when discussed with owners and management.

There are no easy solutions, and more and more companies include human resources as a major function of their

organizations to acquire and develop their staff for growth, 365 days a year. Another interesting development in many markets is the billing rates for irrigation technicians have regularly crossed and sailed past the \$100 per hour threshold, reflecting the cost of putting qualified technicians on the road to service their clients.

Finally, my best wishes for success in 2024. Hoping many of you will be able to attend the Irrigation Show and Education Week this month in San Antonio. The opportunities that are present for education, networking, learning about all the innovation and future direction of our industry might be the best investment in getting prepared for the new year.

Christopher Pine, CLWM, CID, CIC, CLIA, CIT, MCLP, is a principal of IrriTech Training and the president of BluGreen Solutions in Pocasset, Massachusetts.



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