

Problem Solved: Maine Line Fence retains valuable employees despite winter lull

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By Jennifer Van Allen Staff Writer

Main Line Fence is a seasonal business if ever there was one. The Cumberland-based company ramps up April 1 for a season of installing residential fences, chain-link fences and highway guardrails and doing assorted other projects such as building composite decks and dumpster enclosures. During the peak of the summer season, the company has about 25 employees. Once the ground freezes at the end of December and no more post holes can be dug, seven of the workers will be laid off for the entire winter, and four will be laid off for two months. That's almost half the staff.

When workers walk out the door, they take their expertise, proficiency, institutional memory and understanding of the company's best practices with them. Work crews that function like well-oiled machines are broken up.

Additional Images



Maine Line Fence owner Rocky Cianchette retains employees with higher pay, good benefits and off-

season work projects. Gordon Chibroski/Staff Photographer

ROCKY CIANCHETTE, MAINE LINE FENCE

Problem: Maintaining a skilled workforce through seasonal fluctuations

Solution: Offer better compensation than competitors and structure work orders to minimize seasonal impact

Lesson learned: Reinvest in employees any way you can. “A lot of the time it’s just a matter of working hard at treating them fairly. It makes things more expensive, but it pays off.”

“Sometimes we can lose a lot of good people because it’s only going to be a nine-month job and they need work that’s year-round,” said owner Rocky Cianchette.

And if the company can’t recruit enough workers in the spring, it won’t be able to hit the ground running as soon as the ground thaws. Once a new hire is made, it can take up to four weeks to train that person, which can slow down completion of one job and the start of another. That affects the bottom line right away. Because if the company can’t take customer orders as soon as they come in, it risks losing them to a competitor.

“We’re like squirrels, scurrying to get everything stored away before the winter,” Cianchette said.

Main Line Fence doesn’t subcontract any work or hire temporary workers because “you lose control over what’s going to get done,” Cianchette said. That makes retention – even with a three-month layoff – critical.

So how does the company attract people willing to work just nine months a year? And how does it lure them back after a months-long layoff, especially in winters like the one in 2014, when they couldn’t start work until the third week of April?

The first part of the solution involves offering medical, disability and life insurance, plus a pension plan. Main Line Fence also tries to pay competitively. Unskilled laborers start at \$12 an hour, more than the \$10 to \$11 hourly wage often advertised by competitors.

Second, Cianchette has developed a mix of business clients so he can keep workers as busy as possible as long as possible. The residential work peaks in the summer with the influx of tourists and summer homeowners. The commercial work – like the guardrail that a Main Line fence crew just completed along the Androscoggin River in Durham – peaks in the fall, as highway projects wrap up before the ground gets too cold to pave. Main Line Fence also sells products like custom-made cedar picket fences, privacy fences and gates to landscapers, fabricators and subcontractors, in addition to individual components for chain-link fences and wood and steel guardrails.

That work can be done all year round. So if workers are back early from a job, or stay on through the winter months, they have something to do in addition to equipment repairs.

The way Cianchette sees it, it’s just another way to invest in keeping good employees. The average tenure of a Maine Line Fence employee is 10 years.

“We could definitely get by with fewer employees in the depth of the winter,” he said. “But we keep all of the most important people so they will be here when we need them.”

And it has paid off. A dozen Main Line Fence employees have worked there 11 years or more. One worker who started when he was 18 is still working part time at age 72. In the 43 years that Cianchette has worked

in the business, he's never had an employee leave for a job with a competitor, unless the person was fired. And that's important for financial success and safety. A lot of the work Main Line Fence does is fairly risky, because employees are almost always working in uncontrolled environments, such as the side of the road. An injury can lead to the loss of a valuable worker and increase the cost of workers' compensation insurance. The company has gone four years without a reportable injury and 10 years without a lost-time injury, Cianchette said.