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**How To Find And Keep
Superstar Employees...And Other Tips
For Small Business Owners**

*Michael Senoff Interviews
Small Business Owner Tony Bass*

 Michael Senoff's
HardToFind Seminars.com

Dear Student,

I'm Michael Senoff, founder and CEO of HardToFindSeminars.com.

For the last five years, I've interviewed the world's best business and marketing minds.

And along the way, I've created a successful home-based publishing business all from my two-car garage.

When my first child was born, he was very sick, and it was then that I knew I had to have a business that I could operate from home.

Now, my challenge is to build the world's largest free resource for online, downloadable audio business interviews.

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I've learned a lot in the last five years, and today I'm going to show you the skills that you need to survive.

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Now, let's get going.

Michael Senoff

Michael Senoff

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How To Find And Keep Superstar Employees...And Other Tips For Small Business Owners

When Tony Bass started his landscaping business more than 20 years ago, he knew a lot about landscaping, but only a little about running a business. So after struggling the first five years, he decided to do some research to analyze where his business was going wrong and what he could do to make it right.

This is the story of how Tony turned his business around. You'll also hear how he created two inventions along the way while also writing a book about how to obtain and retain superstar employees. And in this hour-long interview, you'll hear his tips and tricks for hiring the best employees possible. Believe it or not, money is not always the biggest motivating factor!

You'll Also Hear...

- How to take an objective look at your small business, analyze where you're losing money and calculate every missed opportunity
- Three ways to advertise for employees for free – you may want to hold off on the newspaper ad until you've tried these
- What it means to be a "superstar employee" and how to screen out applicants to find those qualified and honest overachievers
- The best place to meet prospective employees for job interviews, when to do a "group meeting" and how to talk about the pay scale
- Why Tony always makes his job offers in person and in writing
- Feasible benefits to set up for your employees that will keep them happy for the long run
- And much more

Because entry-level landscapers are generally paid very little to start, Tony says he has had to figure out creative ways to recruit quality people. And in this audio, he shares many of those ways with us along with other tips for making your small business the best it can be. Enjoy.

- Tony: I think that you have to find people that fit the culture of the company and who want an opportunity. I don't think that if you pay a low wage starting out that you are going to always end up with bad people. On the contrary, I think it is your job as an employer to sell your company and the future that it offers. The likelihood for continued employment, the likelihood for growth in the company, and the likelihood for increases in pay can be a great motivator for people.
- Michael: Tony, first of all, how did you start in the lawn business? Were you a kid cutting grass for money as a teenager or what?
- Tony: I am starting a landscaping business, Michael, in 1987. It has been a few years ago, but it was actually a college professor, a turf grass professor of mine that inspired me. He said, "When you grow up one day Tony, when you become a turf grass professional, you will really be somebody." He said, "If you really want to pursue this as a career, I suggest that you go down to the library after class is over and read some of these trade magazines and learn a little bit about this industry because it is going to be a fast growth industry in the future."
- Michael: What do we mean turf grass? Are we just talking about lawns or is this a specialty like golf courses or what?
- Tony: The study of turf grass would involve lawns of residential homeowners, parks, golf courses, any place where you want to grow grass for leisure or for sport.
- Michael: Why did he think that was going to be such a big thing? How old were you also at that time?
- Tony: I was a college student, 19, 20 years old. The growth of the golf course or golf industry was driving his awareness, but also the growth of the landscaping industry. The landscaping industry has grown at double-digit rates since the late 80's and continues to grow. It is really amazing. A lot of that has to do with the fact that there is more and more people in the United States today purchasing landscaping services than at any time in history. Much of that has to do with the aging baby boom population. The fact is that every time someone approaches retirement, they start thinking about the physical difficulties of maintaining and caring for their lawns and landscape. One of the solutions for getting rid of that physical challenge or time consuming challenge for busy professionals is to hire that work out to a professional landscape contractor.
- Michael: So this professor told you to go study up on it and then what did you do?

Tony: I did that. I read magazines. I read stories about people that started landscape companies and was absolutely inspired to read about how their approach to using the technical knowledge of turf grass or horticulture could be used for profit. Ultimately what I was looking for was a way to make money. Here was a real-life example of how studying the technical side of turf grass could be used for profit. At that point and time in my life and career studying history or calculus or biology, I didn't see those kinds of connections where there was a real life that people would pay for this kind of training. It was very, very easy for me to see how the technical competency of knowing about lawns, landscaping, and irrigation, which is another thing I learned about, fertilization, weed control, test management and sports fields, golf courses and all of these things could translate into business opportunities.

Michael: This wasn't something that you needed a license for or do you? Is it licensed now in some states?

Tony: Yeah. They have pesticide applicator's license that you must have, business license you must have, and contractor's license in many states to install and work on irrigation systems. In many of the states, you have to be licensed to do that.

Michael: Did you start your own small landscaping business?

Tony: I started a company just a couple of weeks after graduating from the University of Georgia.

Michael: How old are you, let me ask you that?

Tony: I am 43.

Michael: You are 43, okay.

Tony: I started this company just two weeks after college. I never worked at a company before. I never really had done landscaping for anyone else. It was basically what I got exposed to in college, the University of Georgia that gave me the basic technical background about the job. Then I became a student of the industry after graduating and began reading all I could about the technical side of the business that I didn't feel that I was competent in after graduating. Then just learn as you do it.

Michael: Do you remember your very first account?

Tony: Of course.

Michael: Tell me about it.

Tony: Well I had worked my way through the University of Georgia as a college student at a grocery store called Winn Dixie in Athens, Georgia. The produce manager who I worked for, a guy named Chad Cook. Actually Chad got a promotion and he moved back to the area near the area where I grew up. After I graduated I looked this guy up and I said, "I am going to start a landscaping business." He said, "You are kidding." I said, "No I am not." He said, "I just bought a new house. I need some landscaping." I said, "Terrific, let's go look at it." So we went and looked at it and we ended up drawing up a plan. I got a proposal for him. He said, "Yeah." I started right there.

Michael: So did you start out the right way because you had done a lot of studying? You had the technical knowledge, but what about the business knowledge? What happened with that landscaping company? How long was it just you until you brought on your first employee?

Tony: I hired basically my college roommate to help me get started. That was because I knew him and I knew that he was out of school for the summer. He needed some money too, so it was really convenient for him and I, but the first 5 years was really quite a struggle. When I say it was quite a struggle because finding work and getting work didn't seem to be that big of a problem. There would be times that I wouldn't have as much work as others, but for the most part just going out and doing a nice job, doing quality work, being responsive to people, showing up on time, doing what they asked you to do, providing consistency in terms of showing up when you are suppose to, acting like you have some sense when you come out to do a job, and people would just keep hiring you. To be quite honest, it was a real struggle from a financial standpoint and the reason was that I simply didn't have the tools that I needed, the intellectual tools from a business standpoint to make my company very profitable or very large. It was 1991 when I stumbled across a little book that you may or may not heard of Michael, it was called the E-Myth by Michael Gerber.

Michael: Oh yeah. Sure.

Tony: It was Michael Gerber, his wisdom that said hey wait a minute you have to quit doing and doing and doing. You have to work on your business instead of in your business. You have to work on the system for replicating, duplicating your process and procedures. When I read that book by Michael Gerber everything changed for me from a

physical work standpoint, from a mental planning and preparation standpoint.

Michael: At that time what did your company look like before you read that book, right at that time?

Tony: When I read that book I had 9 employees. We had revenues of, oh gosh I guess it was around \$300,000 or \$400,000 in sales a year, annual sales. I was working 50 or 60 hours a week and really wasn't making near enough money to support family and any kind of hobbies.

Michael: Right.

Tony: You know the fun stuff outside of doing your job everyday. So it was a job and I was the most responsible boss that I could have had for myself. I made myself work all kinds of hours and very little pay, which is the way a lot of entrepreneurs start off.

Michael: So when you read that book what was the first thing that you did to take action to really implement what you learned in that book systems.

Tony: The first thing that I did was that I took a 6-month sabbatical. I took 6 months off and began to focus my effort and energy working on the business.

Michael: What did you do with your accounts? What did you tell your employees?

Tony: I have to be more descriptive with my sabbatical. It was a sabbatical that I didn't take any more clients on and I didn't attempt to grow the company. I simply began to come in and let the employees that I have do the accounts that we had. Essentially it was all maintenance at that time, Michael. We were doing mowing, pruning, weeding, fertilizing, cleaning up of the leaves and/or debris, people throw out trash or whatever and we clean it all up. I just said, "Wait a minute. Before I take on one single new customer, I am going to really study what we are doing, how we are doing it, and begin to document the process and procedures well enough so that I know what we are doing good at and what we are not doing good at." So when I say a sabbatical, I took a sabbatical from working on the crew. I took a sabbatical from going out and writing estimates for new accounts. I still went to work. I still had the company. I still had employees, but I did absolutely nothing to try to grow, expand, or to obligate myself in any way that I could out in the field.

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Michael: What were some of the things that you did that you really saw was making a big difference in your business? Where were some of the biggest challenges that you were having?

Tony: It comes back to employees. The very first time that I hired an employee and sent them out to do a job without direct supervision and guidance without my being there watching, pointing and participating, the results were less than perfect. The results were either they did the job too quickly without enough quality or they did it much too quickly without enough quality.

Michael: Was this kind of when you took your sabbatical, so you weren't really overseeing your employees or you didn't have a manager overseeing what they were doing and because of that they would do a poor job?

Tony: Well with 9 employees, we were working on two or three different job sites at a time. We would have two or three crews out working that could never be where all the crews were out at one time. That is when the inconsistency in quality, the inconsistency in production happened. The time that I was spending in sabbatical studying, I worked at an engineer at that point in time at my company really doing time and motion studies, physically watching and taking copious notes as to what I saw, how long it took. For example, we would go out and fill the trucks up with fuel to go to the jobs and have gasoline for the lawnmowers, for the string trimmers, and for the hedge trimmers, and the tools that we would run and operate all day. When I began doing these time and motion studies, I learned exactly what it was really costing me in terms of man-hours, which in dollars and cents costs, but also in missed revenue opportunities.

One example, Michael, of the time and motion study was how long does it take to make a fuel run at a stop at the gas station. I found that the average time it took to stop and get fuel was 10 minutes. We had three people on the crew, so three people in a truck times 10 minutes is a half of one man-hour investment of time. It doesn't sound like a whole lot, but the fact is that the little fuel cans that we were carrying would be empty in a day or two. We would be right back at that fuel station again filling up.

Michael: You were doing that 15 times a month?

Tony: Yeah, we were doing it three times a week on average, sometimes more and sometimes a little less, but on average we did three stops a

week. Three stops a week with three men on a crew, now it wasn't 30 minutes, it was an hour and a half. An hour and a half times 52 weeks in a year and all of a sudden we are talking about 75 man-hours. My goal from the time and motion study was to figure out a way that we could reduce the number of fuel stops from three times per week to one time per week. I did that by designing some onboard fuel tanks that would carry a large enough quantity of fuel so that we would be able to make that one stop a week and not run out of fuel until the truck had actually ran out of fuel.

Michael: Was that your very first idea for leveraging time with these trucks that you design?

Tony: Yes.

Michael: That is very interesting. Okay. You made a modification to your truck to carry enough fuel, which would eliminate all of these fuel stops?

Tony: Actually that was one of my first observations. The next observation was how much time we were spending doing things like this, looking for tools. We would get to a job site, for example we needed to change a blade on an edger. An edger is a tool used for trimming the driveway, sidewalks, and curbs around the property. You can change the edger blade, but you can't find the correct wrench. So then you have to dig around the toolbox and try to locate the toolbox under supplies that were already stacked on the truck. Things were a little disorganized. I started to look at how much time we spent each day either looking for tools or supplies that we needed. You know, oh man I can't find the scissor shears. Where are the scissor shears? Oh, Jeff had them. Then you have to go walk across the yard and find Jeff and ask him what he did with them the last time. It became crystal clear that a tool organization system would improve productivity.

I began thinking about that. Then I made up a list of all of the tools that we would need and established a set, defined inventory of those common tools. From there, we looked at the process of driving around town. At the time, the company was operating with pick-up trucks, trailers. These trailers you would hook up to the back end of the truck and you would tow them all around town. What became crystal clear is most of the guys that operated a pick-up truck with a trailer would have difficulty during the day maneuvering those pick-up trucks and trailers around town. They would either be on a busy street and need to back out of the driveway into a neighborhood or they would get into some tight, urban area and have to go down and around the block in order to have enough room to get back and position the truck properly at the property. They would go to lunch and rather than just parking it in a

parking spot close to the restaurant they had to park over in the mall area adjacent where there was some open areas to put the pick-up truck and trailer. All of these little things just rob your time. It was robbing my company of time day-in and day-out.

Michael: Were you paying your employees by the hour?

Tony: Yes.

Michael: Okay. The clock is ticking, you have all of these employees and you know they are being paid by the hour. It is killing you to seeing them wasting your money.

Tony: None of the stuff that they were doing was intentional.

Michael: I know.

Tony: It is just the way they thought it was and the way things were in the company. It was part of the daily grind. At the same time unintentionally and I didn't really know at the time, but when you make it harder for someone to do their job whether it is locating the proper tool to do a job, finding a property to go and do some work at you make it hard on people. You give them equipment that breaks down, doesn't work properly, doesn't work safely then it demotivates them. It does absolutely nothing for employee retention, for people taking pride in their work and wanting to stick with the company.

Michael: Now that makes sense. That is interesting. Give me one idea of a system that you put in place based on these studies of time and efficiency.

Tony: Probably the biggest impact that it had on the company was paying attention to what we were doing each morning and each afternoon. We began to call it the morning circus and the afternoon shutdown. The morning circus was always when the guys would come into work, the guys would come into the office to get their assignment for the day. Then they would load the truck with the tools and supplies that they would need to go out and do the days work. Then they would return in the afternoon. They would take the tools and supplies that weren't used off of the vehicle, off of the trailers that we towed, put it into a shop and a warehouse area to be locked up and stored overnight out of the weather. Then we would come right back in the next morning and we would do the whole thing again. We would load tools and put them in the truck, put them all in the trailer, get supplies if necessary. Then we would leave for the day. It was interesting that morning circus always took about two times the amount of time that it would take to

shut down in the afternoon. You can imagine a couple of reasons why. People are always more anxious in the afternoon to get off of work, than they are to get started on work in the morning, it is just that process. I said, "Wait a minute. Why does it take 20 minutes to get ready to go in the morning? It only takes 10 minutes to shut down in the afternoon." What if we can eliminate starting up and shutting down all together? What impact would that make? I also said, "This is a 30-minute problem. Twenty minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon. Thirty minutes of time. Well it is not just 30 minutes of time because at that point and time in my company there was 9 employees.

Michael: What were you paying them per hour, just an average?

Tony: Average was about \$10 per hour.

Michael: Okay, 9 employees and that is \$90 an hour. That is \$45 a day.

Tony: That is right, \$45 a day. This is what I always like to say. It wasn't that \$90 a day just in cost because our billable rate at the time was \$30 a man-hour. It cost me \$45, but I missed being able to bill \$15.

Michael: Yeah, your opportunity costs.

Tony: Right. So you have to add those numbers together. It wasn't \$30. It was 9 times \$30 or \$270. We missed billing \$135 for that half an hour. See you start off with a negative \$45, right? Well when you say that you are going to take away a negative and add a positive, minus a negative is another positive. It is a little trick of math, right? It is negative \$45, plus \$135 is an \$180 impact.

Michael: That doesn't even include ongoing automatic billing with customers that you could have had during that time.

Tony: That is right. Basically \$180 per day in financial impact of a company that works in the part of country that I am at about 220 days per year outside, 230 maybe. You are talking about almost a \$40,000 swing in profitability and revenue. It seems very clear and obvious today, reflecting on it. I assure you that it was not that clear at that time to me. It is not that clear to other people in that position today. Starting a company and trying to get the people organized, trying to get the systems in place to reduce wasted time.

Michael: I see a couple of patents. What did this lead you to develop? Can you tell me about these trucks? How far after these studies and the realization of these huge wasted resources and time did it take you to develop this truck and to systematize for your whole company?

Tony: Two patents really. One is on a hydraulically operated loading ramp that becomes a rear door for an enclosed cargo van type truck. IN 1991, when I began on this sabbatical, I had no idea where I was going with this. I ultimately decided that I needed to eliminate the use of trailers in my company to haul equipment around. What I wanted to do was to get the trailer eliminated. I wanted to put all of the gear into the back of a truck, but I needed to have a big truck with enough room to put all of the tools and supplies. If you are familiar with commercial vehicles, commercial trucks, they are kind of high off the ground Michael. Cargo vans are some 36 to 42 inches off the ground, medium duty classified trucks to carry enough weight I was talking about like commercial mowers, trailers, blowers, and all of this gear. They are off the ground a bit. Then I got up there in the back yard garage and began tinkering with building loading ramps in the back of a truck that I had purchased. Over time we figured out how to make a ramp turn into a rear door for the truck and do it in a neat and compact fashion so it provided security, provided a loading ramp, and it made it easy and safe for people to get gear in and out the back of the truck. It was about waist high from the ground.

Michael: All right, so you have a patent on this device?

Tony: Yeah. It is called the hydro-ramp.

Michael: Is it a utility patent or a design patent?

Tony: It is a utility patent, a patent for something that we have done.

Michael: Is it really unique in the industry? No one else has anything like this?

Tony: That is right. We are the sole source for super lawn trucks.

Michael: Wow. That is great.

Tony: Then we have a second patent on some of the tool storage devices that we have built to go inside the enclosed truck body. The way we have stored our shovels, rakes, and hand tools turned out to be another novel idea. Pretty cool.

Michael: That is great. So you have this, what are they called super long trucks?

Tony: Super lawn, L-A-W-N, trucks.

Michael: Super lawn trucks. Why don't you tell me, what is one of these trucks going to do? Let's say I am in the landscaping business. I have three or four guys and I am doing the trailer. I am experiencing all of the challenges that you had and the time wasting. If I bought one of these trucks, what is it going to do for me?

Tony: The first thing it is going to do is the truck serves as a warehouse on wheels. The truck becomes the warehouse. That is you eliminate the need for storage buildings or warehouse space in the company when you use an enclosed truck. Number two, when you are using an enclosed truck, an enclosed truck body, you create an opportunity for billboard signs, advertising or marketing on the sides of the vehicle. Think about the side of a pick-up truck, Michael. You have a very limited amount of space that you can place your name and phone number and perhaps web site address, but on a cargo van, much like a UPS truck or a Federal Express truck you might see, much bigger areas to put your company information. Don't you agree?

Michael: Great idea. You see trucks like that who do nothing but advertise, but you have your own mobile billboard.

Tony: That's right. The first idea is to eliminate the need for warehouse. When you do that you can create a lower overhead scenario for a business owner. The same thing you do is you put signs on your vehicle that are very large, which is very prominent for people to be able to find your contact information, namely your number, your list of services. Then the next thing you do to help innovate your company, to help your company get more done everyday is that you keep the tools really well organized inside of the truck. You get customized tool organization inside this enclosed truck body, which helps your crews all day long making their job easier and safer that is because you have neat and easy-to-use loading ramp on the rear of the truck to walk in and out of, get gear in and out of. The thing that ends up being a huge benefit is that you get to lock your tools away and keep them secure. One of the real difficulties if you are a contractor today is that people will steal stuff off of your truck or trailer, anything that isn't locked up. The security aspect of having everything inside and locked up usually keeps people from exposing themselves to 2, 3, maybe even 5 or 6 thefts or incidents each year.

Michael: Okay. Can we talk a little bit about this most recent book that you put together, "Fifty Ways to Find Crew to Hire and Retain Superstar Employees"?

Tony: I would love to talk about the book.

Michael: All right. Why did you write this book? Who is going to benefit from it by reading it?

Tony: I wrote the book simply because working with more than 100 business owners as a product consultant, one of the biggest challenges, one of the most time consuming conversations we always have is how am I going to find good people? How am I going to find good people to do the work of my company, even when I am not there? It is so hard in any business, but it is particularly hard in the landscape contracting business. Let me give you a statistic. The United States Department of Labor tracks the average wages that is the pay scales Michael, for 825 occupations in America. Guess what? If you are an entry-level landscape gardener in the United States of America and this is your career choice and this is your first job, you rank at about 750 out of 825 occupations in America in terms of pay. There are 750 other job opportunities in America that pay more than entry level landscaping. There are only about 75 jobs in America that pays less. You have to be a very creative recruiter. You have to be very creative to find people willing to take those entry-level jobs, those low paying jobs. What was amazing to me is after I began documenting the process of finding people how universal it would be for other people regardless of whether they operate a contracting company or a bakery or human resources professional at a university. It really doesn't matter. Finding people is a science, just like math is a science. There are certain things that you can do to increase the likelihood that people will come to you looking for work.

Michael: What are the most common mistake business owners make when it comes to finding a superstar employee?

Tony: I think that the biggest mistake that they make is that they think that someone must have experience in order to be a superstar. They think that somebody must have to have or must have had some experience doing the job that you want to hire them to do. In my opinion, that ends up being a mistake.

Michael: What do you think the most important element is in a superstar employee when you are looking or interviewing?

Tony: The thing that is going to be so important to get superstars as opposed to just average employees is finding people that are going to be honest, be punctual, be energetic, be creative and cooperative, easy to get along with. These are traits of a person that has absolutely nothing to do with the technical training that have had or that they have not had. Those are the skills that turn into a real superstar. The people that show up to work on time, the people that do their job consistently, day-in and day-out with a consistent level of enthusiasm, that take

pride in their work. It really doesn't matter the technical training that someone has. If they are going to be a superstar, they are going to have those traits. Would you agree with that?

Michael: I would. Can you take me through an example? Let's say, you have your landscaping company. You have another truck that you want to put out there for new accounts. You need to find another three or four employees and maybe do it in the position of maybe a smaller landscape. Over the years, what you have learned as being the most effective and efficient ways to locate, find, and qualify good employees. Tell me the process that one would do that would give them the best outcome.

Tony: I would like to start by saying that in order to get and find real superstars, you know it is kind of like that old saying, "In order to find a prince, you have to kiss a lot of frogs". In order to find those superstars, you need to have a lot of applicants in your company. What we are going to need to do is we are going to need to deploy a number of strategies or tactics for building awareness about your company and the jobs that you have available or that you need to fill. The very first thing that I recommend that owners or business managers do to find an employee is to begin on making sure that everyone who works in the company is aware that you need employees and exactly what kind of employees that you need.

The very best recruiters that you could ever have for your business is going to be people that are already satisfied working there. There is no rocket science here by any means Michael, but the fact is, is that what I recommend the first thing that an employer do is to post the job opening at the time clock if they have a time clock, the break room if there is where the people gather in the company. Not just internally, post that job also at the front door of the business. How many businesses have you gone by as you ride down the street and you see a "Help Wanted" sign? Help Wanted signs are a great way to recruit. You do it every time that you start to fill a new position. Ideally, you would ask your employees to help you find just the right person. Describe that person to them so that they will know exactly what you are looking for.

For example if you are in the contracting business and you are looking for someone to work on a lawn maintenance crew, I would describe the person as being someone who is physically fit, who loves working outside, who loves being outdoors, someone who may have hobbies that takes them outdoors frequently such as hunting, fishing, or playing sports outside. Just by being a little bit more precise that you are looking for someone that is young, energetic, someone that is maybe

looking for a chance or an opportunity to do something new and different, you start to get people to think on a more specific level. Then hey whom do I know who has asked me about a job? You start to define what people look like, they are more likely to go out and help you find that person and the one that is likely to become a superstar. We don't give up on the sign out front that says "Help Wanted", we get a little more creative. We say, "How many ways could we ask for people that might be interested in working with us?"

This is a great example. If you own a contracting company, you may or may not have a retail facility. You know guys when they are landscape contractors, Michael, or electrical contractors, plumbing contractors or flooring contractors, how many of those guys have a retail storefront? A lot of them don't. How do you put a "Help Wanted" sign up front? One of the things that you can do is you can put up "Help Wanted" signs on the side of your vehicle. Simply putting a "Now Hiring" sign on the side of your truck, on the side of your car if that is what you drive is a great way to build awareness. How much does it cost? It doesn't cost very much to put a "Help Wanted" sign on a vehicle. In fact depending on the size of a magnetic sign on the side of a vehicle, you can get one of those for under \$50. Compare that to what it would cost to run a "Help Wanted" ad in the local newspaper. Depending on the market that you are in, you can spend 100's maybe even \$1,000 on a "Help Wanted" ad, right? I mean the side of your vehicle that you display during times that you meet people can increase the number of applications that you are going to get.

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Michael: That is a great idea. What are some other low-cost ways of running newspaper ads? What is your opinion on running newspaper ads? Do you get a lot of applicants or is it money that doesn't need to be spent?

Tony: I think newspaper ads work. You do get applicants that come in and it is a strategy that you can certainly deploy anytime you need to get people, but I just wouldn't start with that. I would try to do five things that cost me almost zero before I spend few hundred for a paper ad. Here is another really simple thing. I said, "Okay, put a sign on the side of your vehicle. Put a sign on the front door of your office, by the time clock, talk to your employees about the positions available. Here is something that is very easy if you have a business card, and I bet you do, what is on the backside of your business card is a smart thing to use that real estate to further advertise your company. When was the last time when you got a business card with somebody and the fact that it was blank? What is wrong with having a job opening posted on

the back of your business cards? What is wrong with having a business card for your employees that is given to each employee that has that brief job description or overview of that job, including it's pay rate, right on that business card? You have the contact information that is where your company is and the basics of the job right on the business card. How about this? What about putting job applications on the truck, in the vehicle, making them easy to give out to people that you may encounter?

Michael: That's a good idea. That's fine. You can get the applications coming in, but isn't it a very time consuming process going through these? Take me through your system of how you qualify these applicants. Is there anything special on your actual application that gives you some real key indicators whether they are going to be good or no good that streamline the process? Take me through the process from the time that these applications come in. How are they sent in? When someone calls a phone number, do they get a live person or a recorded message giving them instructions? Tell me about that system.

Tony: The application process starts off with getting the basic information about the person. Most job applications are very similar. You have a place to put your name, your address, your phone number, and your previous employment, right? Here is another thing that you can do to help you begin to screen people before you ever sit down and talk to them. It is called a basic skills test.

A basic skills test can test someone for some of the things that you know a person has to be good at or competent at before you would consider hiring them. A basic skills test could include things like this. Math questions. Okay? 25 plus 25 equals, 75 minus 45 equals? Multiplication and division. If you are in the contracting business like I was for years, we tested people with a basic skills test with things like measuring the square footage of the lawn. Length times width, so we would say calculate the area of this square, calculate the area of this triangle and then a word problem calculating man-hours. We talked some about man-hours today and the impact it can make on the profitability of a company. Jeff and John go to Ulysses Jones home to mow the lawn. They began at 9 a.m. and they depart and leave the site at 10:30 a.m. How many man-hours are used on the Jones account? This, you witness someone working in an unsafe manner, what do you do? It is an open ended question that shows something about a person's judgement.

Michael: That's good.

Tony: You have the technical issues of, for example, name three Evergreen shrubs under 6 feet in height. Select the turf grasses from the list of plants below. There are very specific questions that will tell you right away if someone has technical training in that area. Also, the basic things that would apply to any thing from running a cash register to filling out paperwork accurately for the work that you do. So a basic skills test is one of the very first things, the simplest thing you can do to help you begin to evaluate a person before you ever spend any of your time talking to them.

Michael: All right, so you will get the application and then you will look through them. You will identify which ones look pretty good?

Tony: That's right.

Michael: Then what?

Tony: Then, you know there is something that almost I found that only real professionals do this. A lot of business owners don't take the time to simply review the references before you spend any time interviewing somebody. If you will simply pick up the phone and call the references, you will find out immediately if the people actually had the jobs that they said they did and the people's opinions of them because if you take the time and simply say "Would you rehire that person again if they came back into your company?" You will know right away whether or not. "Oh, are you kidding me? Is he available?" Boom. They will tell you more about the person than an interview will.

Michael: Don't you find that when people put references, they are always going to put people who are going to give them a good reference? Why would they put someone who would give a questionable report to you?

Tony: Don't be surprised. I promise you. I have seen so many applications in my career, because people don't always do that. They may think that they had a good work history with someone, but the fact is that calling an employer is a smart thing to do. Just because you put the name on there doesn't mean that they are going to necessarily give you a good reference. Here is a really simple thing, the actual time of employment. Sometimes people fudge the actual time that they spent on the job. They said they were there a year and a half and they really only spent six months there. People stretch the truth about the position in the company. What they were really responsible for. I have seen that probably more than anything.

Michael: So what do you do when you see someone stretching the truth or lying, do you continue or are they done?

Tony: I don't waste my time with that person. That person has demonstrated without any remorse or hesitation to distort the truth, so there is no reason to even talk to someone like that.

Michael: Let's say that you find a good one that really looks like there is some potential, what do you do? Do you call them back and invite them in for another interview?

Tony: The ideal situation is that you would invite them into your office, if you have an office. Invite them into your office to take somewhat I would call pre-hire evaluation test. I had no idea Michael that such tests could be used or were even available until I actually hired a human resources expert to come in and help me in my company. I learned about a test called the ERI, the Employee Reliability Interview. By having an applicant answer 83 true and false questions, a little hand test. They would read the question. They would circle true or false. From taking this 83 question, true and false exam, I would be able to enter that data from the answers of the questions into a little piece of software and get a printout that gives me, believe it or not, the likelihood of this person to abuse drugs and alcohol, the likelihood of this person to work well with others, the likelihood of this person to stay in a job for any period of time and immediately you learn about the person's character from this little exam.

Michael: I see that you are using personality profiling.

Tony: Absolutely. This test is so inexpensive, I think it cost about \$15, but it absolutely tells the truth about whether this person has the honesty that you would want to work in your company.

Michael: Okay, so you have him take this personality profile test. What would you suggest, let's say I am a landscaper, I don't have an office. Where would I meet the guy?

Tony: What I recommend for really small clients that don't have an office, I recommend that they meet in a coffee shop, a Staples or Home Depot, something like that where it is kind of a business environment. Give it to them there or hopefully you can email it to them. You don't actually have to meet them to give it to him.

Michael: Would you ever do the practice of meeting several applicants at the same time for leveraging your time?

Tony: You better believe it man. That is one of the strategies that I talk about. Your company grows and you need more and more employees. What you have to learn is that you don't have to meet with

people one on one. You can meet with a group of people at one time. You can talk to all of them about the job opportunity, the review of the company and what the future plans are for the company to create awareness that this is a great place to work. Then you have them all fill out the same test at the same time. Tell them that they can wait around to know if they are going to have a chance to be called back or they can call back later that afternoon to see if they can have a follow-up interview.

Michael: Okay. You look at the results from this test. It is easy to read the results after they take the profiling test?

Tony: Oh yeah. It takes a few minutes to input the data.

Michael: All right, then you will look at the results. Just based on that and whatever observation you have, what will you do next?

Tony: Well by this time you have an application, you have an employee-screening tool in that you have a basic skills test. Then they have made it to the point where you have this ERI, which tells you a little bit about the likelihood of them being honest. Then you have a pretty good idea whether someone is worth talking to. The other thing that is really helpful that I find is just eliminating people during that meeting. Group meetings can be really great because you can eliminate people who are really there shopping around, but don't know anything about the business or the industry and they haven't disqualified themselves as of yet.

Here is a good example. During my presentation to 50 perspective employees, I put up a photograph on a screen that shows a snake that one of our crews encountered out on the job site. I simply say, working outside is tough work. It is hot. It is dirty. Sometimes you are exposed to things that you may not enjoy. Things like spiders and snakes. If you don't like spiders and snakes, it is really a good idea for you not to apply for this job or continue this application process. You would be surprised Michael, that some people who had not disqualified themselves at that point will say, "You know what, I hadn't thought about that. I am out of here," and simply leave.

Michael: All right. Let's go back to you qualified in your group meetings, you have done the personality profiling, you are looking for the high scores. What do you do next once you see a potential superstar? Do you invite them back for a one-on-one?

Tony: Well, I want to put in the likelihood that people I want to talk to would actually take a job before I ever talk to them. I want to make certain in that group meeting that I go ahead and talk about the pay and benefits.

Michael: This is going to be the first time that they are going to hear anything about money?

Tony: Pay and benefits would be mentioned in any of the ads I place.

Michael: Is there a strategy on that?

Tony: I am going to give them a range. I am going to give a pay range where I would take someone with no experience, no background, first time they ever have been hired on a job, and what I would pay my top man in that same position. I am going to give them the whole range.

Michael: What are you going to tell them as far as pay and benefits? You are going to do that in a group meeting, right?

Tony: Yeah.

Michael: You are going to try and qualify more people. If they don't think it is enough money, they are out of there.

Tony: That's right.

Michael: How do you handle the money when you are hiring? Do you pay well? Do you start at minimum? What is your secret to that when it comes to money? I mean if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys?

Tony: No. I don't believe that. I think that you have to find people that fit the culture of the company and who want an opportunity. I don't think that if you pay a low wage starting out that you are always going to end up with bad people. On the contrary, I think it is your job as an employer to sell your company and the future that it offers. The likelihood for continued employment. The likelihood for growth in the company and the likelihood for increases in pay can be a great motivator for people. I have found in my career that a young person that has yet to discover that they are a superstar will work for the same thing that someone who thinks they are a superstar, but they are really not. That is, if you are going to hire somebody and pay them minimum wage, there is nothing wrong with that if they think that they can be making two times that in a short period of time. If you start off paying someone too much to start with, then it is hard to increase it. It is not easy to increase them as quickly. I tend to want to start off at a two-week or four-week trial period and pay as little as possible, as little as they will work for.

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Michael: That shows something about them, their character and are they willing to start off that low for the potential.

Tony: Exactly. They say, "Well, do I trust myself to be a good employee? Do I know that if I come in here, I am going to make an impact on this company and this man and this employer over a quick period of time?" Those people don't feel like they are going to be disappointed. They don't feel like they are going to be stuck at the same pay.

Michael: What are you going to tell them as far as pay? Give me the systems that they are going to start off for, for two or four weeks on a trial basis at minimum wage. After that, what do you promise them? Then tell me what you are promising them based on good performance that they can earn. How do you get that desire for them to go for these raises? Do you know what I am saying?

Tony: I think it is important for them to have pay scales within different positions in your company. An entry-level technician is going to earn less money than a person who is a supervisor of other people who is going to make probably less money than a manager of a small team. What I would talk to an entry-level technician about, up front in our very first meeting, as the steps to go from the technician to the supervisor to the manager. I will lay out that ladder in front of them because they will know exactly what they have to do in order to earn the top dollar in your company.

Michael: I gotcha. Do you give them a time frame on how long it would take based on their performance to get to those next steps?

Tony: Exactly. What I always find is using examples of other employees who had taken those same steps how much time it took them to give them an idea of what others have done.

Michael: Why don't you give me an example of one of your guys, a typical employee that started off entry-level technician? How long did it take him to get up to where he is now? Start with pay.

Tony: I will give you an example for the landscape business. The entry-level job begins in a landscape technician slot at \$7 an hour. You can go up to \$8.50 an hour in this position. It will increase from \$7 to \$8.50 based on three things. Number one is going to be time with the company. Number two is going to be your ability to learn how to use the different pieces of equipment that you are assigned to use.

Number three is based on customer feedback. That is the client and what they say about you and the things that you are working on. We want to make sure that we are getting good feedback all the time from the customers. Then once you have maxed out at that job, you go to a crew leader position.

A crew leader position begins at \$8.50 an hour and it goes up to \$14 an hour. Here is how you go from \$8 to \$14 an hour. At \$8.50 an hour you must have a drivers license and a suitable driving history according to the standards set by our insurance carrier. You see in order to legally drive our vehicles here at this company; you are going to have to submit a driving history report. If you have speeding violations, DUIs, or bad driving habits then you simply are not going to be qualified to move to the next level. It is very important that you keep your driving history clean in order to move beyond the \$8.50 an hour. If you have that suitable driving history and you are qualified with the technical training, learning the tools then you would be assigned a crew.

A crew leader position is \$8.50 an hour. From there you can go up to \$10 an hour based on whether you are doing what we call residential crews, commercial crews, which is basically the size of accounts. Then we have carrots hanging out here basically. You begin working on certifications. If you become a licensed pesticide applicator then here is the test you have to take. Here is the date it is going to be administered. You are going to get paid an additional \$1 an hour, that is \$2,000 per year based on a 40-hour workweek.

Michael: They don't have to pay for those tests, do they?

Tony: They don't even have to pay for the test, that's right. They actually get paid to go to classes to get ready to take the test. The tuition for the test, the company will pay them back for it as long as they pass it.

Michael: If they don't pass it?

Tony: Then they pay for it.

Michael: What does that cost?

Tony: It can be from \$45 up to \$200 depending on the level of certification.

Michael: I see. If they fail, you take it from their pay?

Tony: Yeah.

Michael: That's fair. Can they study up on that?

Tony: Yeah. We will buy the books. We provide the books at no charge to them, but when it comes to paying the fee for the exam, if they don't pay the fee, they will not study and take it seriously. If they put \$40, \$50, or \$200 on the line, then they will get a lot more serious about studying and preparing to pass the exam. Look at what is in it for them. If you pay someone just a dollar more per hour and they work a full-time schedule, that's \$2,000 per year. We lay out, here are three certification tests that you can take. Each one of them is worth another \$1 an hour to you. So there is a way to get an additional \$6,000 per year. You will have to demonstrate some technical competency along the way. You will have to study some at night and practice what you learn on the job, but here is exactly how you are going to increase your pay from \$25,000 to \$32,000 or something like that.

Michael: All right. Tell me about benefits other than the hourly fee and the potential for growing with the company. What kind of bennies do you offer to try and keep that retention up?

Tony: Well to start with, Michael, I recommend having a – I call it an employer retention bonus. An employer retention bonus is simply a scheduled anniversary bonus. What this is, is that if you have been with our company for one year, you are going to get an additional \$200, \$400, \$600 depending on how many years you have been with the company. See, having one year with the business a person has overcome a lot of hurdles, many technical issues about the work in the company. After someone has been there for a year they become a much greater, much more valuable employee in my view. They have gotten themselves trained in several areas, they have proven themselves from a dependability standpoint to a large degree. I want to make it a big deal just that they have been there for a year.

Michael: Yeah, they are a real asset. One year working with you, they know everything. Explain to the listeners how expensive it is to train. It is expensive to hire and train, isn't it?

Tony: It is part of the strategy for retaining employees. I simply don't think that you have to give away your company or promise people thousands of dollars in bonuses just to stay. I think that the most important thing is to help people to continue to learn. Laying out to a perspective employee, in writing, exactly the process for getting promotions within the company and the approximate value of those promotions in dollars and cents up front when you are hiring them sets the stage for retention. Then retention is confirmed or aided dramatically when you provide them with training, investing money in

them for training. We had in my landscaping business a terrific workforce with an average tenure of three years across the entry-level field workers and crew leaders, which was just phenomenal compared to our industry. I firmly believe that one of the reasons we were able to keep people staying there working for that amount of time was the fact that each and every year we would have specific training events within our company, at our shop, a half day event, where we would bring in someone from outside the company to teach technical skills. We would also spend one day a year where we go to an industry specific trade show or educational event and have them sit through a class taught by university level instructors or business consultants. Just the participation away from the office in a professional environment helps people respect their job, respect their company and say hey this person is investing in me. I think this is a good place to stay and work.

Michael: Other than the bonuses and other than the training, are there any other tips for employers to help maintain employee retention?

Tony: I will tell you something that has really helped. Having a retirement program and talking about retirement is a smart thing to do. Many small business owners overlook the fact that they can set up a simple IRA program for almost nothing. It really doesn't cost much at all to meet with a financial advisor and to set up a simple IRA program for your company. A simple IRA will cost you the employer a little bit of money, but here is the best news about it. Having a retirement program in place at your company helps increase the likelihood that people are going to stay for a long, long time.

A simple IRA is a great benefit to you the employer as well, not just the employee because when you have a simple IRA the basic rules are, I am not a retirement expert, but I will tell you that if you have a simple IRA the company will match up to 3% of the gross wages of an employee. So if a person makes \$30,000 per year and they contribute 3% of their wages or \$900 towards a retirement program then the company will also match \$900 towards this employee's retirement program. If the employee is not all that interested in putting money towards retirement, they don't put \$900 or 3% or 1% or anything, then you the employer don't have to put anything either. It doesn't cost you a thing. The great news is that you, the owner of the company can increase the amount of money that you put in your retirement program from a standard IRA of \$4,000 or \$5,000 up to \$11,000 or \$12,000 as the owner of the company. You gain a benefit of being able to put more money into your retirement. Plus, if an employee does choose to put 3% of their wages into this retirement program, then you the employer actually have to spend less money on employee benefits from medicaid or social security benefits. The \$900, you don't have to

pay social security or medicaid benefits on. So it costs you less than \$900 actually to have the program in place.

Michael: Give me one more strategy for retaining employees. Let's talk about the actual hiring process once you have identified a good candidate and you want to invite them to become an employee. I want to hear the process of how you handle that, but just give me another strategy for retaining.

Tony: Let's just say that an employee is a real superstar. They are going to care about where they work. You will know that from meeting with them because they are going to ask you questions about what you are going to do for them. Something that you can do with key employees, people that are going to become true superstars, is you are going to want to build the business around them for many, many years. You can set up another vehicle, a retirement program, around life insurance, a life insurance policy with a written vesting schedule. Do you know what I mean when I say written vesting schedule, Michael?

Michael: No.

Tony: Basically, let's just say that you have someone who is going to become a manager in your company. You want them to stay with your company for a long time. One of the benefits that you can set up is you can buy a life insurance policy for them that may have a face value of \$100,000, \$500,000 or \$1,000,000 depending on the situation with this employee? Say the policy premium is \$4,000 a year, you the employer provide that as a benefit however, you the employer own that insurance policy and every year that the employee stays with your company, they begin to own more and more of that policy.

Michael: Okay.

Tony: A written vesting schedule might go like this. Michael, I am going to offer you this position to come to work here at my company. One of the benefits that I am going to offer you is that I am going to buy a \$500,000 whole life insurance policy. This will give you the comfort to know that in the event of your untimely death, your wife, your children will be paid this \$500,000 benefit. I am going to buy this whole-life insurance policy Michael. It is going to cost me \$6,000 a year and \$500 per month. Each and every year of the next five years, you are going to gain ownership of 20% of that policy. So five years from now you will be vested 100%. Do you follow that? 20% year one, 40% year two, 60% year three, 80% year four, and 100% year five. During this time that I have provided you with this \$500,000 whole life insurance and I am paying the premiums on your behalf there will be

cash value building in this insurance policy. After you own the policy 100%, you have some choices to make. Number one, you can take the cash value or the money that has accumulated in the policy and use it to buy a new home if you want to, use it to pay for your kid's school or college education if you need to, you can leave it there and let it continue to grow, but you own it after 5 years. That is a sample of a little bit more sophisticated retirement program that someone can set up in a small business and not have to provide it to every single employee.

Michael: You would not offer that to every employee or you would?

Tony: I would not. That would be something that I would offer to management level people.

Michael: When you are talking about some of the benefits, you could mention that once you get to this level we could offer that to you.

Tony: That's right.

Michael: That would cost you; you don't get any discounts on that policy that is going to cost you \$6,000 a year, right?

Tony: You are going to pay for that, that's right. What you do is again, you get people thinking from day one. I think that is a big mistake that owners make when they are trying to hire people, particularly when they are trying to find superstars, is that they think I have to have somebody now. They don't think about talking about three, five or more years down the road. I think that is a real key part of finding those real superstars out there.

Michael: Someone who has vested a couple years into that policy, they are going to think twice about leaving.

Tony: That's right.

Michael: Yeah, that is all retention. That is good. What about when you are ready to hire? Let's say that you see an applicant. They have passed all of the tests. How do you invite them to be an employee at your company?

Tony: Always, always provide a potential employee an offer in writing. When you provide an offer in writing, they know that you are serious. They know that you are professional. This is particularly impactful on entry-level employees. Think about it like this. When a person graduates from high school or college, they get ready to enter the real world and

they are after their first serious job. Those people that are going to be real superstars, they are going to be a little more concerned about the future. When you provide information in writing and someone else doesn't, you gain a competitive edge to lure them in to your business. Providing it in writing is very important, but then spell out those benefits that they can work their way into as well as the ones that are mandated by the Federal government. Every employer in America that hires someone is required to pay medicare insurance and social security insurance, but many, many employers fail to point out that they, the employer is contributing towards that employees retirement program with social security payments that they make on the employees behalf. So that little detail may point out that you are paying more than a competitor would be.

Michael: Yeah, so you put that in the form of a letter and you mail that to the applicant.

Tony: I prefer to provide the offers in person to see the reaction.

Michael: Oh, I see you ask them to come in and then you have it all laid out in writing.

Tony: I have it all laid out.

Michael: You present it to them?

Tony: I present it to them. I simply say, "Look, I am prepared to offer you a job. I have all of the details here in writing. What I thought I would do is just give this to you right now, give you a chance to read through it. I am going to step out of the office. I will come back in about 10 minutes. You will have time to read it by then. You can take some notes in the margins if you like and get ready to ask me a few questions." Just put them at ease, put them by themselves. You don't have to make a decision today, but I want to give you the chance to reflect upon this yourself, come up with some questions and then we will talk about it. Does that sound fair? Of course the answer is it sounds fair. You make the event a big deal. Coming to work at your company is not just a job. It is the potential for a career, a place that someone will work for many, many years and perhaps a lifetime.

Michael: Very good. One other question that I was curious about is do you have your employees do a drug testing?

Tony: Yes, as part of the process of stepping up in the company there is a Federal law that says if someone is going to drive a vehicle that has a gross vehicle weight rating of over 10,000 pounds, they have to be

able to pass a DOT physical, DOT as in Department of Transportation. That DOT physical includes a drug screen.

Michael: At what point do you do that in the process?

Tony: I would do that before I would hire them. I would make the job offer contingent upon them passing the DOT physical.

Michael: Okay. Have you found that to be a problem? You have presented offers and you make that contingent, then they fail it?

Tony: Oh sure it has happened. Some people have bad habits on the weekends.

Michael: There is no way to streamline that before you make the hiring offer?

Tony: You can – I mean you can ask somebody to take the drug screen before you make them the offer. That is basically what I am doing right then, but I have never asked them to take a drug screen before I made them an offer. I never have. I say that your offer is contingent upon and then have them take it before you actually hire them. I have spent some time qualifying somebody and interviewing somebody. One case, it wasn't drugs or anything like that, but the guy had a bad heart. They do a stress test when they have that DOT physical. There was another case where a guy was a perfect candidate, but he had bad eyes. He couldn't see well enough. He didn't have glasses or whatever corrective lenses. He didn't have them.

Michael: Does the employee pay for that?

Tony: No.

Michael: You pay for that?

Tony: I pay for that.

Michael: What does that cost?

Tony: It is \$80.

Michael: \$80, okay. Let's summarize what we have covered. Give me an overview, the short version of what small business owners can do to find superstar employees and keep them. Then we will talk about how people can contact you.

Tony: Number one begins with using multiple strategies to get a lot of people coming to you. The second part is that just because someone applies for your company it doesn't make them qualified and doesn't mean that you should spend any time considering them unless they can pass a basic skills test and then sometimes a pre-employment screening test so that you can learn about their background. I think that it is very important to use a pre-screening tool such as a basic skills test, such as a pre-employment personality test, and checking with prior employers before you spend one minute of your time interviewing somebody. I think that it is very important to interview someone, but only after you have spent some time doing pre-interview screening. The reason I like that Michael is because the pre-employment screening can be done by just about anybody in the company. You can have a secretary call and follow up. You can have a secretary or assistant score a test. You can have them call and ask three questions of a previous employer and write down those answers. You can do a lot of this pre-screening with other people in the organization. Then if someone is truly qualified then consider using a group environment to build awareness about what the job truly is and what the potential is for working at the company. That way you maximize your time as an employer focusing on the other things that take time in the business. Then when you narrow the field, make sure that you provide an offer in writing and spell out what the next 3 to 5 years is going to look like in the company. Think long term. Think longer term than what you think today about this potential employee.

Michael: Your book, "Fifty Ways to Find, Recruit, Hire and Retain Superstar Employees" is that book going to give me in more detail a lot of the information that we have been talking about?

Tony: Yes it is. It goes into a number of things that we haven't talked about, Strategies for getting into schools, colleges, technical schools, and universities and how to recruit superstars from those organizations. It even talks about rather I should say controversial types of sources for people, programs, strategies for getting customer assistance for employees. It is a pretty comprehensive book.

Michael: What does this book sell for?

Tony: The book comes complete in print with an audio program. It is \$99.

Michael: \$99. That is a drop in the bucket if one can use one little technique in there from hiring, whether they save money from running classified ads or whether they have a way to qualify a prospect and retain employees. That sounds like a pretty good deal to me. What other services do you offer someone listening to this that wants to contact

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you? What would be the best way for them to contact you or to find out how they can order this book?

Tony: Michael, you can contact Tony Bass by visiting my web site at www.TonyBassConsulting.com. T-O-N-Y-B-A-S-S, Consulting C-O-N-S-U-L-T-I-N-G dot com.

Michael: How about a phone number for those people who like to pick up a phone?

Tony: Phone number is 478-822-9706. Again, 478-822-9706.

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