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2024
TECH
REPORT

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CEO, Grunder Landscaping & The Grow Group

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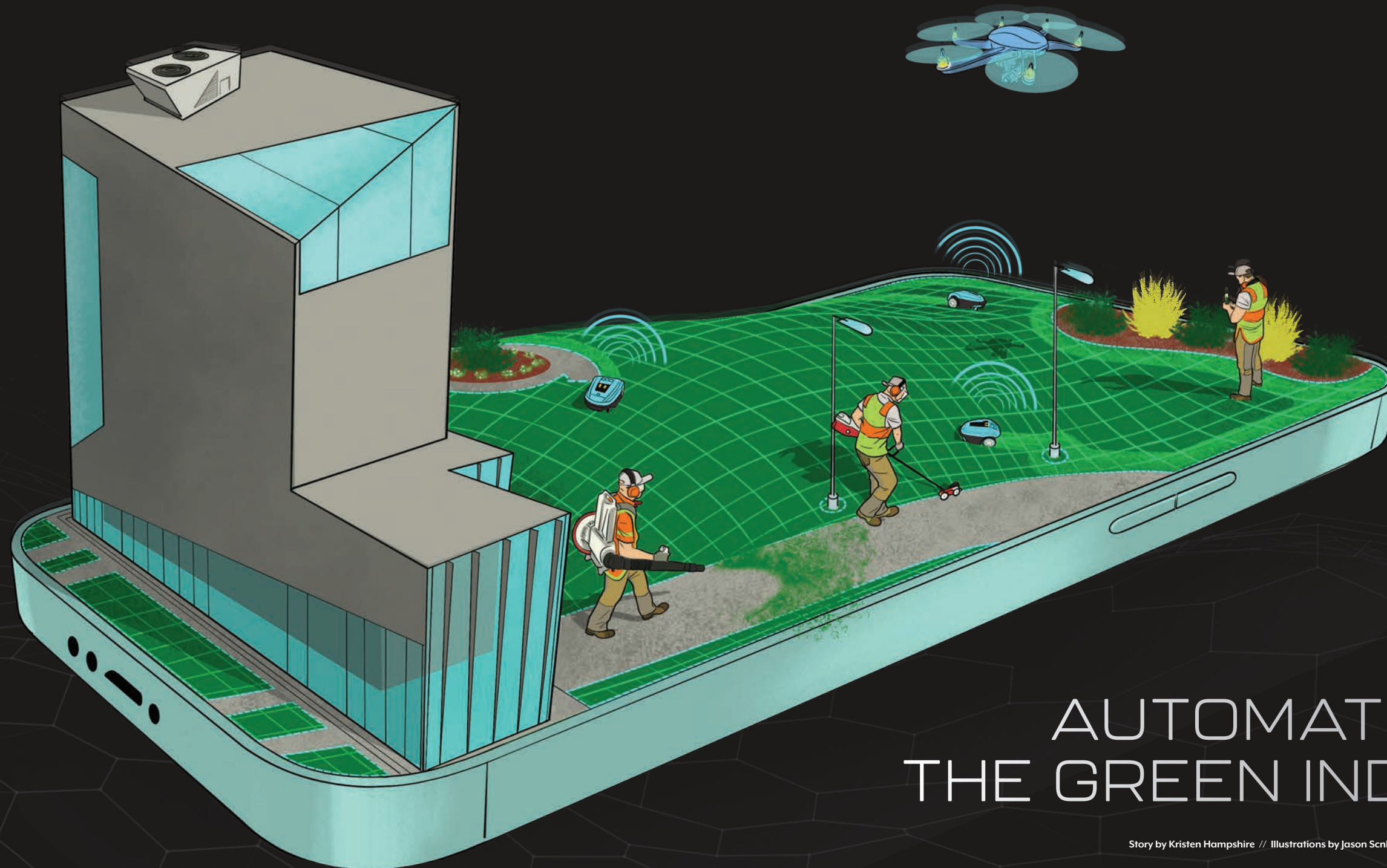
Mark Tipton, CEO
Mark Tipton is the CEO of Aspire Software, which he co-founded with his partner Kevin Kehoe in 2013. Mark is based in St. Louis, Missouri.

"
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The results of the 2024 Lawn & Landscape Technology Report show, for the most part, the obvious — that the industry is continuing to increase the use of different technologies to run their companies.

This year, we pulled results from 2021 survey to compare what has changed from three years ago. Some things that stood out: autonomous mowers, battery-powered equipment and drones, have only grown by 4% and 1% respectively, compared to 2021 results. It's clear there is interest in these segments, but you are still cautious when making the investment. But overall, the industry is using tech more compared to 2021 to appeal to customers and recruit and retain employees, along with other ways to help grow their businesses.

AUTOMATING THE GREEN INDUSTRY

Story by Kristen Hampshire // Illustrations by Jason Schneider

ABOUT THIS SURVEY:

Editor's note: Based on about 150 respondents. Data was collected April 15-24, 2024. Not all totals will equal 100% due to rounding.

Chatbot-generated text blasts and job descriptions, autonomous mower exploration and layers of tech-enabled tools and devices are positioned to help the humans do their best work.

When Lawn & Landscape published this Technology Report in 2021, there was no mention of artificial intelligence (AI). Search engine optimization was high on the radar (still is) and robotic mowers — now formally referred to as autonomous — had a Roomba feel, which has changed dramatically.

This year, we explore how real-time communication driven by an Amazon state of mind is driving businesses to implement sophisticated communications tools. Here's how landscape businesses are testing and integrating the tried-and-true with emerging innovations.

> **"A LOT OF COMPANIES LOOK AT TECHNOLOGY AS AN EXPENSE, BUT IT'S AN OPPORTUNITY."**
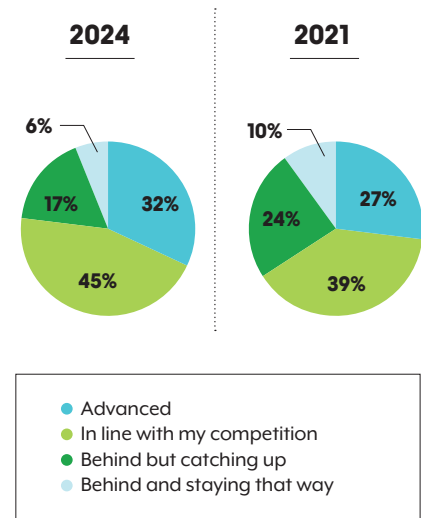> — CORY OVERMAN, OWNER, SHADES OF GREEN

Closing communication loops

"You can do the best job in the world with lawn care, but if you don't communicate effectively with customers, your service is only O.K. at best," says Cory Overman, owner of Lafayette, Ind.-based Shades of Green, a business he started in 2009 while finishing college.
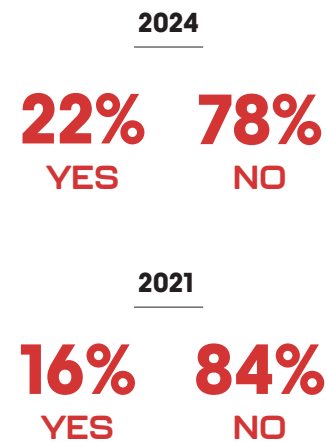
What "lit the fire" to explore client communication and internal tech tools was a fine fescue lawn complaint years back. In northern Indiana, this turfgrass variety thrives in spring or in fall when it greens up. "But it checks out in the summer because it can't translocate enough water," Overman says.

Well, the customer didn't know this. And she wasn't very happy about what appeared to be an ineffective lawn care program. "It was our job to communicate information about the turfgrass and we learned the hard way," Overman says, adding that in the technician's defense, the company should have had a system in place.

How would you describe your company's use of technology and software compared to your competition?

2024

- 32%
- 45%
- 17%
- 6%

2021

- 27%
- 39%
- 24%
- 10%

- ● Advanced
- ● In line with my competition
- ● Behind but catching up
- ● Behind and staying that way

Do you have a Chief Technology Officer, or something similar on staff?

2024

22% YES **78%** NO

2021

16% YES **84%** NO

ILLUSTRATION: JASON SCHNEIDER

Now, Shades of Green has a texting platform in place that seamlessly integrates with its customer relationship management (CRM) and scheduling software. Overman can set up filters called condition codes, hit a button and a text populates with relevant content specific to a customer group. For instance, if a technician identifies dollar spot in a lawn, he or she can dispatch the pre-written text (ChatGPT helps with this) as a way to passively upsell services without being pushy.

"People respond better to texting," Overman adds.
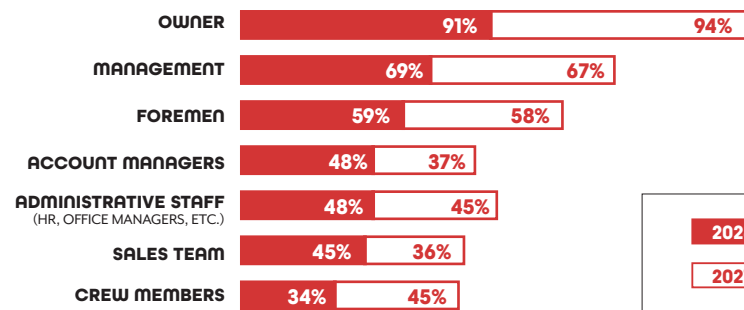
The text platform is also a game-changer for call-aheads.

"We want the convenience of Amazon in everything we do, and we are focused on providing that for customers so there are no friction points for them," Overman says. "We need this for our technicians, too."

The same platform can dispatch internal texts and elevates the customer experience. For example, a customer contacted Shades of Green after spotting some creeping Charlie on the property. "We were able to tag our technician through the app and send an internal message: 'While you are on the property, can you take care of this?' Then he messaged the customer, letting them know he addressed the issue. It's a critical communication loop: We heard you, we saw what you explained, we took care of what you asked for and here is what to expect."

As for writing informational texts related to services — and internal documents like job descriptions — Overman often relies on ChatGPT. "We used it to revamp customer communications, service descriptions and pretty much anything we send out via text we run through ChatGPT first," he says.

Who on your staff has a company smart phone or tablet?
(Choose all that apply.)

	2024	2021
OWNER	91%	94%
MANAGEMENT	69%	67%
FOREMEN	59%	58%
ACCOUNT MANAGERS	48%	37%
ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF (HR, OFFICE MANAGERS, ETC.)	48%	45%
SALES TEAM	45%	36%
CREW MEMBERS	34%	45%

ChatGPT also can act as an office assistant. When Overman was figuring out what to charge for aeration and overseeding services, he uploaded production data from the CRM program into ChatGPT and it provided an average cost per single pass for a lawn, for a double pass and how much seed is required per square foot. "It would have taken us several days and many manhours to do this manually and ChatGPT figured it out in 10 minutes," he says.

Overman has tapped ChatGPT to help out with complex Excel functions, too.

"A lot of companies look at technology as an expense, but it's an opportunity," he says. "Consider what you could earn and accomplish during the time it takes for a human to handle some of these complicated functions."

An Open Mind to Optimization

After 32 years in business, Les Lightfoot has evolved from basic spreadsheets to a fully optimized CRM platform that integrates with fleet management software, a smart irrigation system and the tools LEI Grounds Groomers uses to communicate with clients.

The Houston, Texas, company with 50 employees focuses only on HOA maintenance accounts.

"When you have data and information in front of you in a number format, it tells a story that can help you be more productive and profitable," says Lightfoot, the company's president.

Last fall, LEI Grounds Groomers shifted to its current business platform — a move to simplify reporting that Lightfoot had wanted to make for about five years. Overhearing migration headache stories, he went into the process expecting some upsets, and he also put a team and plan into play. "Having a team tackle a project like this is vital," he says.

The company's accountant and estimator were involved, along with some key managers and an integration specialist at the software company. Rather than rolling out the system to technicians in the field, Lightfoot opted to give only managers access to the app for inputting data.

"I've heard of companies who have guys

What was your 2023 revenue?

20%	10%	14%	13%	12%	8%	23%
UNDER $200,000	$200,000-$499,999	$500,000-$999,999	$1 - $1.9 MILLION	$2-$3.9 MILLION	$4-$6.9 MILLION	$7 MILLION OR MORE

in the field use the system, but when there is a mistake that is made, someone in the office has to find it and fix it," Lightfoot says. "We chose to have a dedicated person in the office who tracks the crews and puts the prior day's GPS records into the program every morning."

Because of streamlining its use, Lightfoot said the first month the office closed the books, the process only took about 15 minutes — not days.

Lightfoot approaches technology with an open mind. He is exploring a smart connector program for hand-held equipment provided by the manufacturer. It gathers and transmits data from equipment to collect run time information, last location of tools and other fleet management insights. "It seems like a really cool program, and we just started looking into it," he says.

He's been watching autonomous mower advances but will wait and see.

"The last thing I want is to have an accident on a job, so I would like to see more hours in the field as that technology develops," he says, figuring the ideal applications would be in areas where there is not a lot of pedestrian traffic.

Lightfoot is also exploring AI-optimized fleet video. Currently, the company's vehicles are equipped with forward-facing cameras. The AI-enabled video would provide helpful prompts, he says. "It can tell whoever is in the truck to put on their seatbelts, slow down or watch out ahead."

The company also deployed new irrigation technology that he says helped their top- and bottom-line revenue. "That has been a game-changer for our irrigation department," Lightfoot says of the smart controller system that gathers data like rainfall and temperature to create watering schedules.

It has allowed the company to remotely monitor and control irrigation systems, reducing the need for sending out a tech to make manual adjustments in many cases.

Tech Tools Drive Rave Reviews

Since January, Jonny Nichols Landscape Maintenance in Dover, Del., has more than doubled its Google business reviews and saw an increase in star ratings from 4.1 to 4.6.

"It's been many years now but ever since Jonny Nichols took over fertilizing our yard it just keeps getting better." (This reviewer handed out a 5-star rating.)

And another: "They have helped us get the yard cleaned up twice now and I cannot say enough about how they seem to operate like a well-oiled machine."

Plus, a fan named Peter O. remarks, "Not only is the service itself excellent, (my lawn has never looked this good!) but they respond quickly and effectively to any

How much does your company depend on technology and software compared to 5 years?

Note: There wasn't much of a change compared to 2021 answers.

- 42%
- 33%
- 22%
- 2%
- 1%

- A lot more
- Somewhat more
- The same
- Somewhat less
- A lot less
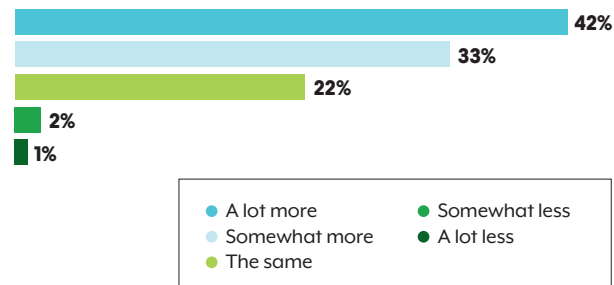
How much have investments in technology or software helped you recruit and retain employees?

Note: Only 7% of people said 'A lot' in 2021.

14%	34%	31%	22%
A LOT	SOMEWHAT	NOT REALLY	NOT AT ALL

special requests I may have." Response time and seamless communication are front and center for the second-generation family-owned business, with marketing administrator Rebecca Stubbs leveraging its integrated CRM and texting platform as a tool for maximizing customer touchpoints.

The Google reviews are a perfect example.

"After I send out an invoicing batch, I also send out a batch of emails or texts to customers who had service the previous day," explains Stubbs, relating that filters in the CRM system allow her to tag client groups, such as those who received a lawn care application that week.

With this simple review request, the response has resulted in a "crazy increase" of clients who are happy to rate the service, Stubbs says.

Part of this tagging system includes categorizing clients who want to receive text reminders of appointments. Since the systems all "talk," if a customer replies that they will not be home the scheduled day and an irrigation turn-on is indoors, Stubbs can simply move the appointment and crews see the real-time change.

Each crew member is equipped with a company-supplied tablet with an app that shows their daily schedule and allows for taking pictures on site that can be dragged into customers'

files. "If I have a customer with an irrigation leak, the client can send a photo, I can pull that into the system and send a message directly out to the irrigation tech with a picture," Stubbs explains.

All company vehicles are equipped with GPS — also linked to the main system.

Overall, Stubbs says, "It keeps information all in the same place and there is a lot more accountability with the activity logs — what's been said to whom and what actions need to be taken."

Stubbs notices a marked boost in customer satisfaction.

"I know we are moving in a positive direction with marketing because we are tracking what postcards people reply to, and we log that with tags," she says. "When customers say how they heard about us, we load that information into the system so we know which campaigns are getting a return and which ones are not really working."

Meanwhile, the client outreach extends beyond service notes to a regular newsletter, and Stubbs relies on ChatGPT to generate topics and some basic content framework that she can modify.

"We have come a long way, and the communication is unmatched," she says.

No Going Back

Initially when Alicia Abell started at Monarch Landscape Management in Houston, Texas, technology was a way to gain a competitive advantage.

"Now it's the only way we can run our business efficiently," she says of the 23-year commercial maintenance firm that dove into its first operations system about 10 years ago.

Can customers pay for your services online?

Note: One anomaly in comparing 2021 to 2024 is less companies let customers pay online.

2024
73% Yes
NO 27%

2021
77% Yes
NO 23%
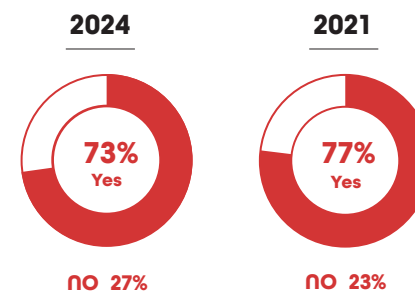
Do you feel the technology or software you use as a company makes you more attractive to potential customers?

2024
69% Yes
NO 31%

2021
54% Yes
NO 46%

Respondents had the chance to explain their answers: A handful of those responses are below.

"Absolutely! 1. Client portals make it easier for customers to easily manage their estimates, upcoming jobs, invoices, payments, etc. at their leisure. 2. Real time tracking of trucks and equipment allows us to update our clients if they call in asking for a question in regards to arrival times (mostly important with snow removal). 3. CRM software allows us to better organize client notes, etc., making us more efficient at answering their questions."

"The customer appreciates the transparency we are allowed to provide because of technology. For example, digital site evaluations, cloud managed irrigation with digital reports and pictures, and capabilities to report issues and concerns immediately."

"Since COVID, we went all electronic invoicing and payments. Changed in that we pay way more in transaction fees, but customers pay faster."

"I don't know that potential customers are attracted to software, they're attracted to results and most don't care how you get them."

"My customers just like a nice job done and not care about the technology."

"Our core value proposition is offering the highest quality service and craftsmanship in our region, most of the technology and software we use is not customer facing."

"Customers expect us to keep up with technological advances and other industries tend to be ahead of the green industry. So, we are having to provide solutions to be on par with what they are receiving and experiencing in other sectors."

"Our clients are busy people and the more streamlined and efficient we can make our services and doing business with us the more attractive we will be to the market."

During the last five years, Abell has concerted efforts toward "incorporating tech into everything."

"Literally everything," she says.

This includes tracking leading and lagging indicators, fleet management, customer communication, billing and generating solid standard operating procedures (SOPs) and training materials. Add to the list smart irrigation monitoring and HR functions such as a platform that employees' access to review documents, submit time-off requests or reference paystubs.

Monarch employes about 150 team members, and "having complete buy in" has been key, Abell says, speaking to its most recent migration to a new business platform. She established an integration team of "super users" including several representatives from her company and the software firm.

The catch: roll-out date was not ideal being in May.

Though, she points out, "Is there ever a convenient time? We said, 'Let's rip off the Band-Aid and jump into it, embrace it and make it work. There was no failing. No going back."

This attitude drives innovation at Monarch Landscape Management.

The company provides cell phones to crew leaders and up, and two-in-one computers with cell service for account managers allow them to access any information they need in the field to provide quick proposals.

Which of the following do you use at your company?

	2024	2021
MOBILE TECHNOLOGY – APPS; SMARTPHONES	82%	79%
BUSINESS/ACCOUNTING SOFTWARE	81%	79%
SOCIAL MEDIA	75%	65%
GPS SOFTWARE/ EQUIPMENT	53%	46%
DESIGN SOFTWARE	50%	47%
ONLINE MARKETING	50%	44%
ELECTRIC/BATTERY-POWERED EQUIPMENT	45%	41%
SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION	43%	44%
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE	26%	-
DRONES	17%	16%
AUTONOMOUS MOWERS	9%	5%

Note: Artificial Intelligence wasn't an option in 2021.

What do you use software for in your business?
(Choose all that apply.)

	2024	2021
PAYROLL/ACCOUNTING	83%	83%
FIELD SERVICE/SCHEDULING	68%	54%
JOB COSTING/ESTIMATING	67%	59%
PROPERTY MAPPING	61%	52%
CRM/SALES MANAGEMENT AND TRACKING	59%	48%
GPS/FLEET MANAGEMENT	57%	45%
LANDSCAPE DESIGN/DRAWING	57%	47%
MATERIAL INVENTORY	38%	25%
WATER MANAGEMENT	20%	12%

Simply connecting on FaceTime can expedite business and help with decision-making between crew leaders and field teams, Abell points out.

"Using the systems fully helps us really understands our numbers," she adds, relating an experience when the company adopted a piece of an electronic filing system for receipts and invoices — and it really wasn't worth it.

"The idea was to better pull info when audited or to ensure the accuracy of our filing, but we found it was more time-consuming than we could accept. We gave it six months, and ultimately decided we weren't using the system to its fullest, and because we were only utilizing a small piece, it wasn't worth the time or investment."

What proved valuable was a credit card system that, once a card is swiped, sends the customer a text asking for a picture of the card to maintain for auto payments, if desired. "This prevents lost receipts," Abell says.

Because Monarch has approached its latest operations system in an all-in way, she's seeing more traction with upsells and "penetration" of customers electing more than one service.

Now on the docket: an effort to go 100% paperless.

"It's the only way to go," Abell says.

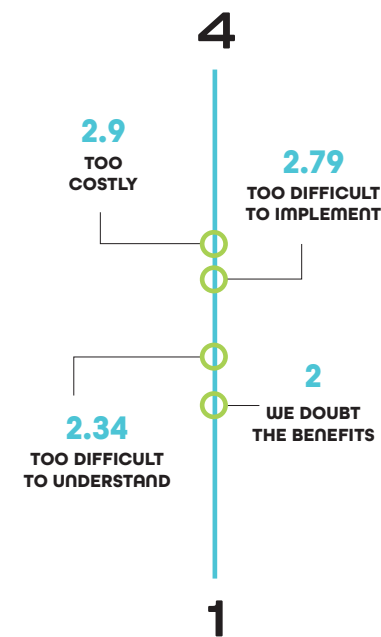She says the same thing about leaning on tools like ChatGPT.

"We standardize messaging, so if we are going to aerate the turf, we use Chat-GPT to come up with the benefits and create a template so when we propose the solution for customers, they understand what it is, how it works and what to expect," Abell says.

Abell updated training manuals with more robust information, enhanced job descriptions and wrote SOPs for the company using ChatGPT as a rough-draft writer.

"I input 10 key points for our SOPs, input it into Chat and boom, now we have the real makings of a nice SOP manual."

Where the company has not deployed

Rank in order the factors that stop you from investing in new software with 1 being the major factor.

4

2.9 — TOO COSTLY

2.79 — TOO DIFFICULT TO IMPLEMENT

2 — WE DOUBT THE BENEFITS

2.34 — TOO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND

1

How are you using Artificial Intelligence at your company?

"To write communication to customers."

"Using it to write copy. The irrigations techs are using it to write quotes, I am using it for all manner of activities from generating art for training to using it to brainstorm names as we are rebranding the company."

"AI is implemented mainly where our marketing campaigns are concerned. We utilize this tool in order to design graphics and flyers for social media posts and newsletters."

"We use it here and there for email marketing and figuring out the best way to present some difficult topics and information to our customers."

"Very minimal, at the moment only using maps and voice commands but would love to use more."

AI is in its phone system. "We have people on staff answering phones, and there is an emergency phone number for clients and someone is always on call for off-hours assistance," she says.

Streamlining Manpower

Brandon Granger moved from printed Excel schedules distributed daily to crew members to an operations platform that team members access with an app. He admits, the old way was "cumbersome and hard to keep track of because if it rained, it was hard to switch the maintenance schedule."

He started his Florence, S.C.-based business in 2002, and like most, relied on paper and pen for years. But embracing technology for the maintenance side of his business has been a game-changer, he says.

"Our team members have apps on their cell phones, and they use those in the field to track manhours, see all their jobs for the day and they can take photos of completed work to submit to the system," Granger says. This offers documentation that Granger Landscapes was on site. Granger credits the adoption to eliminating part-time office staff.

Next on the list of implementations is GPS for vehicles. Already, Granger uses a phone system that forwards all office calls directly to his mobile.

"We have done answering services in the past, but you either deal with an issue now or deal with it later, so allowing people to reach me directly by phone or text provides better service," he says.

Granger sees a place for autonomous mowers in wide-open spaces. He's not jumping into the arena for now.

"I don't see residential customers biting into it yet," he says, adding customers still want to know the company they hired is showing up to take care of their needs. **L&L**

The author is a freelance writer based in Cleveland, Ohio.

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Niwar Nasim
Owner & General Manager, Nasim Landscape

* Results are illustrative of certain customers' success; your individual results may vary.

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