

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Up With People

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Robots, automation, labor-saving devices both cheap and expensive ... I feel like I've spent the last year doing nothing but searching for and writing about big, impressive, computer-and- video-camera-driven machines that might help you get more work done with fewer people.

Not that there's anything wrong with employees. It's just that there are so few of them who want to do the jobs that have to be done in a greenhouse or nursery. And they're getting more and more expensive. Which is the explanation for the recent surge in interest in alternatives to human labor.

Actually, greenhouse technology has been my beat at *GrowerTalks* since I came aboard in 1993. The late Vic Ball, whom I worked with for four years, loved technology. He wrote about the earliest plastic coverings, the first boom irrigators, the first energy-saving curtain systems, the first seeders.

I've been happy to follow his example and can be found sticking my head in the latest transplanter whenever possible.

All that said, I recently got to thinking that maybe we're at risk of placing too much emphasis on reducing or eliminating our staff count as a cost-cutting measure. Machines cannot make decisions. Machines cannot interact with customers. Machines cannot grow a crop (in spite of all this talk about artificial intelligence and algorithms). Machines cannot bring a smile to our faces or challenge us to think about how we do things. Machines cannot care about our businesses.

For an example of how the elimination of humans has backfired on companies, look no further than the automated attendant. You know—"Press 1 for sales, press 2 for marketing, press 3 for ..." How many of you hear that and immediately press 9 to speak to a real, live person?

The automated attendant was low-hanging fruit, a simple, low-cost way to use technology to eliminate a telephone operator or receptionist. And yet I'll bet many of you consider it a scourge and a curse ... which is exactly what you do after pressing all the buttons and still not find the person you want. (Then there's the hold music, but that's another topic ...)

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the business you call regularly whose phone is answered by the most pleasant, wonderful person on the planet, the one who remembers your name and asks after your kids and your dog. The same goes for in-person interactions. I've been to a nursery—it might be Costa Farms in Homestead, but

others of you may have this, as well—where the receptionist's name plate says, "Director of First Impressions," emphasizing the importance the company places on that role.

I firmly believe that positive customer interaction is going to become a competitive differentiator for many companies in the future. Take McDonald's, where more and more often you place an order at a digital kiosk, then wait for a human to shove the tray or bag across the counter at you. Fast and convenient, yes, but totally impersonal. I guarantee a competing chain will emphasize their friendly, smiling human staff.

Front-line interactions are one thing, but what about serious decision-making? That's going to be more critical than ever in this new high-tech, high-cost age. For this, you need the best people you can find. What I suggest is that while you're calculating the payback on that new automated cutting sticker, you're spending as much time figuring out how to attract and keep the highest-quality people you can possibly find—the most intuitive grower, the sharpest marketer, the crazy smart financial manager—people who will guide you, inspire you, push you, challenge you. And also celebrate success and cry over failures with you.

Taking advantage of technology to increase efficiency, and reduce waste and costs is more important than ever. But keep in mind that the plant business was, is and always will be a people business, from the breeding end all the way to retail. You cannot automate your way to success. But you can hire people who will help you succeed. Keep that in your mind as you strategize for 2020 and beyond. **GT**