



# Landscape Ontario Podcast

## Get better first:

### Why businesses need to improve before they grow

**Host:** Karina Sinclair

**Guest:** George Uvari, Co-founder of Knowledge Tree Consulting

## Transcription

### INTRO:

Karina: Welcome to the Landscape Ontario podcast, I'm your host, Karina Sinclair. Today I'm talking business strategy with landscaping veteran George Uvari. His philosophy is less focus on growth, and more on improving people and processes. George has found great success using tools such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to better understand the different ways people like to work and communicate. And by focusing on hiring for attitude, streamlining processes and outsourcing certain tasks, George found a way to reclaim time, reduce stress and even have fun running a successful company.

George has learned about all of this as an entrepreneur. He co-founded a landscaping business with Peter Guinane while in university, and over the next 37 years, built Oriole Landscaping into an award-winning design-build firm with over 40 staff. George and Peter handed over the operational reins of Oriole and then co-founded a second business together, Knowledge Tree Consulting. Having learned some hard lessons along the way, George now shares his earned wisdom as a business consultant, helping his peers find ways to streamline their operations and put the right people in the right roles.

George has a lot to say about this, so let's get to it!

### Music transition

## Interview:

Karina: George, I'm so delighted that you can join me today. I'm really excited to talk about your philosophy in making a business better. Not necessarily growing it, but making it better at the size that it is. We have a lot to unpack today, but first I want to get a sense of your background in landscaping.

George: Sure. Thanks so much for having me. I'm honoured to contribute to Landscape Ontario and it's been a huge part of my life. It's made my business better and I know that of my peers and some great friendships. So, thank you.

A bit about my background, I guess I'll step back. I went to university and I studied all kinds of things, economics, finance, history, political science, international relations, organizational behavior. And so I have a very wide view of the world. My parents were from Hungary, in Europe, so I have a sort of a connection to another continent and I didn't really fit in anywhere. And I sort of found my place at the age of, I think maybe, fifty-two or fifty-three. So I'm sure there's a lot of people there who are listening to this that haven't found themselves yet. And you know, it's a journey for sure.

So some of the things that I've learned now I think are very useful to help other people find themselves and get to a better place in their businesses and their lives and be better citizens, to be honest with you.

Karina: You make a great point about being on this journey and maybe being more than a couple decades in and realizing that we're still learning, still figuring it out. And people at the start of their career, maybe in their 20s, might be thinking that when they're older they'll have it all figured out, but that's really not necessarily the case. We do gain wisdom throughout the years and through our experiences, but there's still always something to learn and improve.

George: Yeah, so I started the landscaping business while I was in university and hired all the kids in my neighborhood to work for me. And it kept growing and essentially I got lucky. I hired somebody who was way better than me at a number of different things. And then I hired somebody else who's way better than me at a whole bunch of things. And I got lucky essentially. And so, you know, I started the business out almost forty years ago. It still runs without me and I've pretty much done everything from knocking on doors to get business to shoveling to climbing trees with tree spurs and harnesses, to doing masonry, carpentry,

operating machines, repairing machines. I've literally done pretty much everything you can possibly do in a business from estimating to finances to budgeting to taxes to just about every part of the business. So it gives me a unique perspective on what it takes to run a business. So that's my background pretty much. Yeah.

Karina: It does take someone with a Swiss army knife, like you said, a set of skills. I love that term because it's really useful and it shows how somebody can have a broad range of skills. Maybe even unexpected skills that can be useful in a pinch in all kinds of different environments. Now, when you've built your landscaping company throughout the years, you grew it to be quite substantial. Oriole Landscaping has a great reputation within the landscape community and it's at a point now where it runs without you at the helm. How did you reach that point?

George: So I'll step back. I think the first big move, I remember I was taking a DOS Simply Accounting course and I realized, wow, this teacher is way better than I am and way faster. And I asked her, how much would you charge to do my accounting for me? She said, 'you can't afford me.' And I said, 'well, tell me how much.' So she did. And I said, 'well, you're hired.' And she was shocked. So I had her for about ten years. So the first thing I did is I offloaded my financial component of my business so I didn't need to worry about doing all the administrative entries and all the grinding bookkeeping because I couldn't keep up with the sales and the operations and the estimating and everything else. That was the first hat that I shed and I knew I was never going to be as good as that person at it and nor did I really enjoy it. I could do it. It was painful, but I got that out of the way. And so we were fortunate our entire business career we've had phenomenal people in the financial helm of the business. And so that was the first hat that I shed.

The second big move that I made was I shed the operations hat. So I stopped doing the scheduling. I stopped doing the estimating and that was a big relief because that's the most dynamic role in the business. I also used to do HR at the same time. So that was the next hat that I shed was the HR hat.

And then the last hat that I shed was the sales hat. So there was a progression as the business grew, letting go of these responsibilities or even more importantly, accountability, so I didn't have to worry about them. And so that was great.

It's just the next problem was we didn't have a reporting structure. We weren't all running the same direction at the same time, so I implemented a meeting system for our business from top to bottom, where every meeting is organized with an agenda. It happens at exactly the same time. Everybody has to be there without exception. And essentially what happened was it downloaded my mind into the "what has to happen, when it has to happen, where it has to happen, who needs to be there, how it needs to be done." And it became the formula for the transition for me to get out of the business. So I turned into coach rather than, you know, Chief Meddler slash Chief Know-it-all to Chief Empowerment Officer. So that title, CEO chief empowerment officer, really sticks in my head now. And that's what I do now. I essentially make sure that I make people better than me because they probably are better at certain things than I am anyway, and then give them the tools and the support and the peer network within the company to thrive.

I think I would shed the hats in the order that I mentioned. And then what I would do is I would implement a meeting structure to disseminate information in the right way. And there's a lot more that goes into it, but those are the big kernels of wisdom that I can pass on, that are game changers for a business for sure.

Karina: I love that term, Chief Empowerment Officer. That really changes the perspective of somebody in that role who maybe oversees the vision and the future of a company as opposed to the day-to-day grind. I think it's also really clever to be able to offload some of those tasks to people who really know what they're doing, who are already experts in it as opposed to having that steep learning curve in all the different roles that a business owner has to take on in the beginning.

Now, what about a team that's quite small? Maybe just one person and they have one or two people employed with them. How could they offload some of those responsibilities?

George: So, that's a really good question. There's actually sixteen different personality profiles according to the Myers-Briggs and there's four major categories. So the fewer people you have, the harder it is to fill all of the gaps. However, the companies that I find most successful have one or two people in the analytical quadrant. And so those people tend to look at numbers, data, statistics, trends, patterns. So they're very good at organizing things and they can make really good judgments, generally speaking. So the businesses that do better have probably one of those people, or if not two of those people in the business.

When you think about luck, right — a lot of small businesses are sort of married couples, husband, wife, teams, family businesses, and you'll see incredible combinations. And the more businesses I go visit, the more I can see that oftentimes there might be a spouse who is really good at accounting, things like that. And so that is such a huge plus to keep costs down, especially when you're a startup. And then you might still have somebody who's a visionary out there hustling and selling and all that stuff. So you kind of have two of the biggest parts of the business organized.

And so there's five pillars in business. There's what's called economics, which is money, insurance, law, product. You've got technology. And of course, everybody needs to use computers and software these days. So somebody who's handy with that stuff is very useful. In a business and every successful company I go to, if there's somebody who's good with technology, it's already going to be doing better than the other companies. And then you've got operations. So somebody who can essentially juggle priorities. And oftentimes those people can also implement systems in business. Um, those are very useful.

You've got salespeople and marketing people. And so essentially those five pillars, you know, need to be done. And if you have five people with the perfect psychological attributes and the desire to do those roles, you're gonna be way more successful than somebody who can do it, but doesn't like doing it. But I would say the two big ones are you need to have that Analytical piece. And then the other piece is the Sentinel piece, which is the people that kind of make sure everything's done a certain way and that people don't deviate from the plan.

So it takes all different kinds to make the world work and the more businesses I see, the more interesting combinations I see. The good news is that you can outsource some of these things, right? So there's accounting firms now that you can outsource the bookkeeping to, whereas you couldn't do that before because, you know, now the technology allows you to take photographs of your receipts, which automatically upload to QuickBooks, for example. So that wasn't possible when I was starting my business. So you actually had to find somebody to actually physically come in and personally do the bookkeeping. Or in the old days, you did shoebox accounting. You said, 'here's my box. Sort it out. Good luck.' So things have gotten a lot easier on that piece. The operations are still going to be internal. The marketing is another one too. Now it's a lot easier. You can do quick social media posts with your phone and improve your branding. So, you know, it's interesting that I don't like marketing personally. I don't know why,

I just don't. And I'll never be good at it because I don't like it. Now, maybe I could do it, but I have no interest in it. That also you can outsource. So there's these big parts of the business that you can outsource. Yes, you may pay a premium for it. But it's a small price to pay to reduce your grief, improve your time, and then essentially, eventually increase your profit.

There's nothing worse than say having a bookkeeper that leaves after four years. And then you have to find another one. You didn't get your HST in on time. You know, all those things that cause enormous stress can be handled by an organization that's got their stuff sorted. So I think it's about people and leveraging other organizations. That's the way to go today so that you can have time to do what you gotta do to make the business thrive.

Karina: So what I'm hearing is, where possible, outsource some of those tasks that a business owner might not be the most capable in. They may be able to do it or learn it, push through it, but that might not be their passion. So let other people who do have that passion handle those tasks like marketing and bookkeeping.

George: Yeah. And that might not be the best use of their time either. Right. So that's the thing — you can only do so much. Like, let's say if you were crazy, you worked 3000 hours. Well, there's still more than 3000 hours of work to do in the business. Maybe you want to focus on sales instead of doing bookkeeping.

Karina: And then internally making sure that the right people are in the right roles. You mentioned Myers-Briggs and that's, for those who haven't used Myers-Briggs, it's a way of evaluating people's personality types and maybe their thought processes and their innate strengths. And there's sixteen different kinds of those types and having a good mix of those on your team is probably a good idea because if everybody had the same personality type, then you're all just going to be nodding your head at the same time and not necessarily getting any diversity of thought.

George: Yeah, that's absolutely correct. So I'll give you an example. Let's say you're bold. Well, you need somebody to be cautious and have some sober thought before you go and do something silly. You also need people that are explorers that are out there finding new things and new opportunities. Now in a small business, obviously it might be too small to have all the different personality types. But in larger organizations, you have an accounting department and a marketing department and a business education department and so that's why small

business is so hard is because you have to try and be those things that you're not. To fill the gaps and that's why it's so hard. Whereas in larger organizations, when things are dialed in, you've got the right person. You know the old analogy about the right person in the right seat on the bus? That's so true. And so, you know, when you make HR mistakes, if you don't understand psychology, there's a much higher likelihood that you're going to hire the wrong person. It's not even their fault. It's actually no one's fault. It's just pure blindness. You didn't know. You don't know what you don't know and that can cause a lot of headaches.

We like to do psychological evaluations on our staff to understand who they are and also to figure out how to get along with them. Because different personalities clash. And so when you're building a team, one of the interesting exercises I learned, uh, I can't remember who I spoke to about this, but at university, they would do a Myers-Briggs profile on the students and they would put everybody together that didn't get along and then tried to have them work together and it was a nightmare. And then they would also do tests where they would put complementary types together and they have like this amazing experience. So you wonder why you don't get along with someone, it's not because they're a bad person, they simply have a different philosophy or a different view of the world.

One example would be, I think in the future. And so I'm interested in the past, but I don't revel in the past where some people love to go back to the past. So for me, if I had to hang out with that person all day, it would be exhausting. Talk to me about space. Talk to me about space travel. Talk to me about AI and what's going to happen in the future and electric vehicles. And I'm happy. Go back to the 15th century and talk about medieval history, and I'm falling asleep.

So, again, it's about shared interests, right? If we have shared interests, we're gonna have way more fun together. So I think that's really important when you build a team. There's a vision for the company, but you also need people that kind of fit that vision. So, you probably don't want a historian on your team if you're trying to go boldly where no man's gone before. Might be good for reference though, just to avoid problems.

Karina: Are you thinking that people of similar types work better together or are there cases where people with different types — perhaps someone who's analytical with a dreamer — could be a good pair because they offset each other with their strengths and weaknesses?

George: Yeah, 100%. So the trick is to stay in your lane. One of the things that corrupts communication and harmony is power. And so the trick is to eliminate the power dynamic and come up with a basis where it's solutions based. And I was watching a podcast with Alex Hormozi talking about the difference between care and kindness. So kindness is telling people what's wrong. Care is worrying about how they feel. So I think some people are more sensitive than others. You know, some people take things personally. So there's so much work to be done on the nuance of communication and understanding each other.

I think it comes down to leadership. I think learning to be a good leader is probably the biggest skill set that people can develop. And part of that is understanding all the different attributes of all the different people on your team and then learning how to communicate with them correctly. So that there's no offense and things are done in a proactive way, but you don't avoid things that you should confront in real time.

It's not easy. I mean, there's so many different combinations and there's a spectrum, right? So you might be really, really extroverted, like really, really loud. And somebody might be, you know, somewhat loud, but not really loud. And so depending on what role you're in, that can be irritating to some people. For example, an extrovert like myself, we think out loud. So when we think out loud, we're vulnerable. When we make mistakes, everybody sees it. An introvert, they may think to themselves inside and then everybody's wondering, well, what are they thinking? So, at least if you understand where the introvert and the extrovert are coming from is one of the criteria for understanding people, you're going to be more forgiving of where they're coming from. And I would say not even forgiving. I would say understanding. To understand is to forgive me like, 'okay, I see where they're coming from. And it's different than where I'm coming from. It's not wrong. It's just different.'

You know, at the end of the day, someone needs to make a decision. So there always has to be a decision maker and somebody needs to have the final say. It can't be by committee. That doesn't work very well. Then you end up with watered down decisions. You do need to listen to people, though. And that's a real skill that I think is lost on a lot of us, including myself. That's probably one of my biggest blind spots that I have to learn to listen. And hear people deeply so that I can be better at helping them.

Karina: And also creating space for them to speak up. I'm an introvert, so I know that in my personality type, I like to think about things quietly on my own. I'll mull it over. I'll walk away,



puzzle through it. And then when I come back with my final thoughts, I have given it a lot of thought. As opposed to an extrovert who might be thinking out loud in the moment on the spot. Not that either is right or wrong, they're just different. But it may be interpreted that somebody who doesn't speak up at a meeting that they might not be interested or they don't care or they don't have thoughts. But really it's making sure that given time they come back with something they've thought about. And you have to know that there are different personality types in order to create that space for them.

George: Yeah, and that's something that there's such a nuance to that and it's amazing. Imagine you don't even recognize the person's an introvert and you've already labeled them as uncommunicative or whatever it is and they have enormous value to offer. And oftentimes introverts will speak up, but they need to feel comfortable in the environment. So, you know, the first time you meet them, they might be a little more reserved. And then the fifth time they might be far more open or maybe it's at the grabbing of coffee or whatever it is that's happening. So you're right. I think creating that environment for people to feel comfortable expressing themselves is very important. Otherwise you're gonna have a massive blind spot and you're gonna miss out on this wonderful insight that these people have to offer or you're gonna label them as somebody that is not contributing.

And so I think patience is probably one of the greatest attributes that somebody can have. We're oftentimes quick to judge. And ironically, with my personality type, the last letter is Judgment: ENTJ. So I'm quick to judge. So what I do now to protect myself against my own hubris is I tell people if I make a mistake and you see it, please call me out and I'll reverse course because I'm so fast. That in order to make up for my flaws, at least I can admit to my mistake and then circle back and regroup. And then you'll have an understanding of where I'm coming from. So it goes both ways, both the introvert and extrovert really have interesting challenges to overcome to try and be better communicators and make people comfortable.

Karina: Absolutely. And these are things that you learned over the course of running Oriole Landscaping. And then when you reached the point where you could hand off the management of that company, you started a new company called Knowledge Tree Consulting. Can you tell me a little bit more about the services that you offer in that space?

George: Sure, so I was doing a health and safety course probably about fifteen, twenty years ago and someone asked me if I could do some consulting for their business after they heard me speak and I said sure. So I gave them a price. I came out and that was the beginning of my consulting career. And I formalized it about five years ago.

Essentially I'm a systems process guy. The goal for me was to build a business that worked for me rather than me working for the business. It took me a long time to figure out how to do that. I hired a lot of consultants along the way. I had a lot of mentors. There were a lot of people that I admired that I looked up to for inspiration. I suffered an awful lot in terms of the pain and anxiety of running a business, having to make payroll, getting the sales, dealing with all the customer issues and logistic issues and economic cycles and ups and downs. And I found it to be very, very stressful.

And so I realized that, you know what, I'm really good at process and I think I can help the most people by creating great processes that I can teach them how to use. And so if there's a method of work, then you can always come up with great solutions. No matter what the person is, the numerator, as long as the denominator is good, so if I make it an easy process for you, you're going to enjoy it.

That's part of that chief empowerment officer; it's not just empowering people. It's empowering systems to leverage people's talents. So I essentially built a business at Oriole Landscaping that runs without me because it's process based. And we also have great people and we were very cognizant of who is sitting in which seat on the bus and what can they do? What value do they bring? You know, things like 'what's our values, what's our mission statement.' Those things are all really important to us and the people that run our business believe it. And so if they believe it, then they're going to be far more engaged and will push the business forward. So I think it's about systems and people.

And then the culture is essentially your internal metric of how well you're doing. So if people get along, everything's fun, you're doing a really good job. If they're not, you're doing a really bad job. And that's a mirror, the culture is a mirror of your leadership, ironically. So there's a lot of work to do on the culture front to get people to be kind. In other words, not be nice, but be kind, to do the right things so that there's no downstream issues for other people. Because something didn't get done and someone else has to pick up the slack. So the idea is if we all contribute in a collective way, nobody has to work more than they already do. And the systems

can help with that. Leadership can help with that and ultimately the culture starts to reinforce the positive behaviors and you get more of that and so you get a business that's fun to be at and most businesses are not run like that.

So I love helping businesses get better, not necessarily from a profit perspective. Yes, that's also a huge part of it, but for me, it's number one: get rid of the stress. Number two: create time to think. And then number three: make more money personally. And then number four: be more profitable. In that order.

If you're not taking care of yourself financially, what's the point of the whole exercise? And so when I look at people's financials, oftentimes I see higher profits, but I'm like, 'I wouldn't do that job for what you're paying yourself. If you got hit by a bus and you had to be replaced, no one's going to do it for that amount of money. So your profits are actually inflated.' And I think it's really important for people to recognize that it's a lot more fun to go to work when you're getting paid fairly. That applies to your employees as well as the owner themselves.

Before you worry about profits, worry about paying yourself and your team fairly, because if you don't pay your team fairly, you can't keep them. So I think that philosophy of fairness is something that is an absolute necessity. It's a foundation for a great business, I think.

Karina: Why do you think this isn't common knowledge already? You would think that that might be something that people would understand going in, that they need to pay themselves and they need to have a well-paid crew to be able to keep them and promote them. It seems like this is something that a lot of people are still coming to terms with and I'm a little surprised by that.

George: Yeah, so one of the things I'm really disappointed in is people try and sell shiny objects to people. And you hear about profit first and you hear about winning the game of business and all these things. And I think it's more like winning the game of life, and business is just a part of it. And so peace and harmony are worth a fortune and having profits is a byproduct of having peace dividends. So I believe working on building the best business isn't just the most profits. I'll see people that make enormous profits, and then when I look at how much they work, I'm like, really? What's the point of that? You're literally killing yourself for your business.

And by the way, you might have profits, but your business isn't saleable because it's all you. So that's great. And what's the point of that?

So, you know, they're not mutually exclusive. Sure, you need to work hard. Absolutely. But ideally, you're going to work smarter. And if you work smarter and harder, then it's fun. But if you're just working harder, it's a mistake.

I see a lot of stuff on social media promoting things that I think are antithetical to most of us who are human beings, which is to have a better life and not sacrifice everything for the almighty dollar. It's hard to convince people that growth isn't everything. Growth can be improvement. Growth can be less stress. Growth can be better incomes for your staff. So there's lower turnover. That's growth. It's not all about the bottom line and the bottom line is incredibly important if you want to have a viable business, for sure. But what's the point if you're pulling your hair out every night and not sleeping?

So I think building a team is the most important part and empowering people and giving them systems to thrive in. And if you do that, the profits will come. But most people are focused on trying to be tactical and scramble and make that next dollar and save here and there's no strategic planning. You know, those are what I call 'the distressed businesses.' Then there's 'opportunity businesses' that I would say are on the other side of the ledger where now they don't know what to do. Should I do this? Should I do that? Should I do this first? What should I do next? So there's always problems and the size of the problem often is a function of the leader's ability to make smart choices.

I think we have shiny object syndrome as people. Just in general, all humans, we always want the next best, latest, greatest. That's something we have to train ourselves to fight to some degree because it's not healthy to always have to have the newest thing and the best thing and the latest trend and the newest shoes and it never ends. I think being better is what it's all about. And the companies that I've worked with, the ones that want to improve the culture of their business, want to improve their lives, their work-life balance, they tend to have way more fun. And the employees, you can see it. So it's not just the owners, it's the employees who are the beneficiaries. That's where pride comes from, when you take care of other people so they take care of you. That's the ultimate, I think.

Karina: Mm-hmm. Yeah, social media would definitely have you believe that hustle culture is the way to go and if you're not hustling then you're lazy. Peace and harmony are not shiny things but boy are they so important, and without them you don't really have anything else that's of genuine value.

George: Yeah. So, you know, it's tactical thinking. I'm just reacting constantly, you know, anxious and comparing myself to others and compare yourself to yourself. And, if you're a little bit better today than you were yesterday and you add that up, you know, that's why I'm a big believer in the philosophy of continual improvement. You know, if I improve one thing that has a carry-forward effect, then for the next twenty or thirty years that I'm in business, I have one less problem. So it's kind of like death by a thousand cuts and the idea is to get rid of all the razors and then you don't get cut. But you have to be conscious in making those improvements.

Obviously, we like to start with the most impactful, biggest pieces of your business first. In business, we have what we call SWOT analysis: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. And we have 121 questions and I believe seven categories. Oftentimes you might think your biggest problem is X, but it's actually Y. And so the SWOT really helps you identify, 'well, actually my biggest problem isn't my chart of accountants. Yes, they're messy, but it turns out that our estimating is terrible. And so that's where we're losing the most money.' Or you might be like, 'I've got to spend way more money in marketing.' It's like, 'well, you're booked every single year. You're booked out five months. I don't think marketing is your biggest problem. Maybe it's staff turnover or maybe your operations are terrible and your equipment is old and breaking down,' and so really it's about learning to identify what your biggest priorities are and then solving them one at a time.

It's interesting because I work with startups as well. They're a lot more fun because they don't make mistakes because they ask for advice before they do something and they have the systems to follow to make sure that they don't make those mistakes. It's like getting your education first and then starting business rather than getting into business, making mistakes, then having to fix them. So that's something that I've noticed a lot. It's a lot easier to start with a fresh business than it is with one that's already running. No matter what the size.

Karina: Yeah, I could see how that startup culture is a little different with this generation as opposed to those who got into the business and just learned by trial and error throughout the years.

Now, what's something that a business owner could do this week to make a big difference in the quality of their team or their business, and improve operations without necessarily growing, but just getting better?

George: The first thing I do when I look at a business is I try to get rid of redundant assets. Or assets that are under producing or idle because that's money that could be used for something else. And it also frees up cash flow, creates liquidity on the balance sheet. So the first thing I always go to, assets, it's the easiest thing to clean up. Almost every company has a lot of stuff that they don't really need, that they don't really use, that they should sell. That's the first thing that I do. The second thing I do is I look at the people in the organization and there's a line that I learned from a great mentor of mine. He used to speak at Landscape Ontario quite frequently. His name was Jim Paluch. He had this line, "the people will change or the people will change." And so you really want to have people who are open to improving and are willing to try things and are not saboteurs. And so people can change.

And if they don't change, then they have to find a new opportunity. I know that's hard for a lot of businesses, but you can't get ahead if you have people that are holding you back. Whether they have a negative attitude, whether they're contrarian, whether they're late all the time, it's really important to set some standards because your culture will rise or fall to the level of the standards. And it's really hard for people because they don't want to criticize. They don't want to condemn. They don't want to nag. I get all that. Hire for attitude. And attitude, aptitude and, you know, experience is nice, but we can always train experience and if you want to have a fun business, you have to have people that are engaged and energized and want to be in your business, not just a job. And I think it's very important to find those people from the beginning. And if you don't have them, then oftentimes you do have to let people go, unfortunately, because they're not aligned with your direction. And it's very hard to get to where you're going if somebody's rowing against you.

Karina: How do you address that in a time where there's a labour shortage crisis? A lot of crews are having a hard time filling those roles and they may be taking people who aren't necessarily a good fit just so that they have bodies in those roles to complete the jobs they've committed to for the next season. When you're in that position, how do you make sure you're hiring people that have the right attitude and aptitude?

George: That's a great question. We have some really cool documents that we send out which essentially pre-test your aptitude before you show up. It'll ask you hard questions like, What's your grit level? How do you feel about lateness? Like straight up front, those are the first questions that you ask. How do you feel about being organized and orderly and neat? For me, I don't work well if it's not orderly, it's not safe. So if somebody's way too laid back and sloppy, that's not going to work well when you're using a circular saw or chop saw or something.

It's important that when you hire people, you essentially set the expectations first. And so we are organized, we are dynamic, we are purposeful in our intentions. We do not like mediocrity. We like excellence. How do you feel about those things? Those are some questions that I would ask up front rather than about their experience. Because if I look at somebody, I can see the way they walk, whether they have their hands in their pockets. I can see whether their dashboard is messy on their vehicle. That tells me a lot about what my job sites are going to look like, what the mentality about safety is going to be like.

Yes, we're in a race for talent. And so your question about there being a shortage of skills and talent in some companies, what I actually do when I look at the financials, I'll say, 'well, you know what? You could consolidate down to three crews from four. Have stronger crews. Get the same amount of work done. Have way less headache. And not even have to try and feed the machine as much just to keep your fourth crew going.' Sometimes it's about paring down, getting leaner, not necessarily bigger to do the work.

This growth mindset is such a fallacy. If we all grew, if all our companies grew at the same time, there would be no work for anybody. So growth is at the expense of someone else. And what you can do is if you make your company the most attractive company because everything runs well, there's great culture, you're going to attract talent because you're a better place to work. Most companies run in a mediocre zone. You really want to be in the excellent zone and you're going to get lucky.

There's actually four types of luck. So there's blind luck. For example, with me, when I met that bookkeeper that was teaching a course, that was blind luck. And I was bold enough to go and say, 'Hey, come and work for me.' And it didn't matter what she was paid. I knew she was going to be ten times faster than me and better. So there's blind luck. There's trial and error. Try different things. There's persistence. Keep going, keep going. Oftentimes like, people say 'oh, I won't use Indeed because I didn't get any last time.' Well, that may be true, but you're not

leveraging your persistent luck, right? So if I try five more times, maybe I will get luckier. You know what? The two other people didn't work out but maybe the next one will. So you can never give up. So that's something most of us make the mistake of giving up too early because we've had some failures. Well, the sum of all your failures might be just your success, right?

And the last type of luck is magnetic luck where people want to work for you and they hear about you and the best people start migrating towards you. I've seen companies where I've worked on their HR with them for years and you can start to see they don't have a labour shortage no matter what's happening. A: they can pay more because they're more efficient. And then B: they have a better work environment for the staff.

So there is a race here. Everybody can improve and some companies are going to do better than others. The question is, which company are you? If we just say, well, woe's me, I can't change the situation. Then you'll be exactly where you were before. I tell companies you have to recruit twenty-four-seven year round and I tell a hundred companies and maybe two of them will do it. Well, they're the ones that are going to win the talent race.

In all these companies, the employees leave because they're unhappy, generally speaking. It's not because they're not getting paid enough. They're unhappy in their jobs. And so the question is, why is that? This is where the opportunity comes for people to have a better workplace. Obviously, training is very important. Most companies just don't even have the time or the budget to do it. I understand that. Having said that, you can still create a much better work environment.

Karina: What kind of tools and resources would you suggest to help businesses make these kinds of improvements?

George: Sure, so a great one on the operations end is a power wheelbarrow. They have some power wheelbarrows with some mini excavators, say the power wheelbarrow is \$40,000. And the mini excavator is \$60,000 with a flat bucket and the total cost is \$100,000. It seems like a huge amount of money, but the truth is it'll probably last you ten years and you can sell it for \$50,000 when you're done. And the cost of two labourers or two and a half labourers for the year is a hundred thousand dollars. So people look at the price of things, not the value. And oftentimes a lot of companies are too labour intensive.



And then of course the people get injured. They get exhausted. So there's so many mechanical solutions. Like we call machines mechanical employees. And they don't complain. They show up every day. And if they misbehave, you can get another one. COVID was the exception for equipment where there wasn't any equipment, but in my forty years, we've always been able to get whatever we need almost without exception. And I think people are way too afraid to invest in mechanization to solve some of their labour problems for sure.

You can also market different types of work. There's a lot of things you can do to pivot where you're working and the types of work that you're doing so that you don't have to use as much equipment.

I'll give you another example of some innovative ideas. There's a company, I think it's called, Affordable Patios. And they only do patios that are rectangles where there's no cutting. So this company, essentially what they do is they build patios that involve no cutting. So think of the amount of time that it saves where they only do work with no steps, just patios. So you can be a lot more efficient if you really think about 'what am I doing? What shouldn't I be doing? Could I subcontract something?' There's another alternative there as well where you subcontract work. You don't have to do everything yourself. Oftentimes we just get stuck with, well, I can't get enough labour. There's lots of solutions out there for sure.

Karina: And speaking of lots more solutions, these are things you're going to be talking about in your upcoming column in *Landscape Trades*, which will be a new feature in that magazine that is available all across Canada. We're going to have you come in and share some of these things that you have learned about building the right kind of team and the right philosophy. What sort of things are you excited to write about?

George: I'm really excited to write about making companies better and making people's lives better through process and helping companies achieve their dreams and goals and not necessarily build empires, but just build great places of work. And I think that'll be a fresh perspective for people.

Karina: Well, I can't wait to see what you come up with. I'm really looking forward to that. And thank you for sharing all of your wisdom. There's lots to dig into. And if people wanted to know more about some of the things you talked about, how can they reach you?



George: The best way to reach me is by email, [george@ktc.biz](mailto:george@ktc.biz), B-I-Z. That's amazing, Karina. Thank you so much for the podcast.

Karina: Fantastic. I hope our listeners really get a lot out of our discussion.

George: Thanks, Karina.

## Music transition

### Extro:

Thanks for tuning in to this episode with landscaping veteran turned consultant George Uvari. I hope our conversation today gives you some ideas for strengthening your own crews. Perhaps by paying attention to different personality types and looking for a balanced mix while hiring. And don't forget to check out George's column in Landscape Trades Magazine, starting with the May 2025 issue where he'll share more ways to improve your business.

Relevant links and a transcription of today's conversation can be found on this episode's page at [landscapeontario.com/podcast](https://landscapeontario.com/podcast).

And, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this episode! Whether you have feedback, suggestions for future topics or ideas for guests, send me a message at [podcast@landscapeontario.com](mailto:podcast@landscapeontario.com). Your input helps me continue to bring valuable conversations and insights to the *Landscape Ontario Podcast*.

Thanks for tuning in, and until next time, keep growing!

## Resources relevant to this episode

[Knowledge Tree Consulting](#)

[Oriole Landscaping](#)

[Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#)

[The Game with Alex Hormozi podcast](#)