Chapter 24 - "Additional Non-Planting Roles"

Some people enjoy the planting lifestyle, but don't enjoy planting trees. If you have a lot of industry experience as a tree planter, moving into one of these non-planting roles may allow you to remain in the industry without needing to continue working as a full-time planter. If this interests you, keep in mind that planting companies generally won't consider applicants for these positions unless you have at least three or four years of planting experience under your belt. You need to understand tree planting quite thoroughly in order to be effective in these roles.

Corporate Organization

There definitely isn't just one standard organizational format for tree planting companies. There are several different ways that companies can be organized.

Figure 24.01
One Possible Organizational Chart.

Although most tree planting companies are structured somewhat similarly, there is a lot of small and nuance variation between different companies.
Graphics: Deposit Photos.

A major influence on a company's structure is whether it operates remote tent camps versus using motels, apartments, or airBnB's for lodging. A remote bush camp is a complex operation, and the logistics of keeping it running smoothly require additional staff that wouldn't be needed when a crew is staying in motels. This additional complexity adds to the expenses that a company must cover. However, a camp can typically be set up much closer to planting sites than would be the case for a crew staying in a nearby community, which can minimize driving time and vehicle costs, and increase productive time on the blocks. Every planting contract is unique. On some contracts, there's an obvious "best choice" for camp vs. motel lodging, and on other contracts, either type of approach could work.

The fact that planting companies can vary widely in their structure is one of the greatest strengths of our industry. Large companies that run remote planting camps plant the majority of the trees in our industry, but having smaller companies is absolutely necessary too. Some people criticize the bigger companies, and say that our industry would be better without any of the large companies, because the smaller companies are "better." That's not accurate at all. Smaller companies don't have the resources to complete a lot of the bigger projects that clients require, and if the bigger companies all disappeared overnight, some of the smaller companies would just grow in size, to fill the void. Our industry needs this variety in size and structure in order to get all the trees planted in any given year. Also, what's better for one person isn't necessarily better for another. Some people like the comfort of motels, are also offer more social isolation. Other people prefer the community and social life of a planting camp, and appreciate not having to spend time shopping for food and cooking their own meals.

Project Manager

A planting company typically designates one person who is in charge of each specific planting project. At most companies, these people are called Project Managers (PM's). I've also seen the term "Project Coordinator" in use. This person acts as the primary senior liaison with the Client. Their role involves everything from taking part in planning before the project starts, to communication and fixing problems while the planting is occurring, to reporting and completion of deliverables after the last tree goes into the ground.

For a remote camp-based project, the PM probably deals mostly with planning, facilitation, and reporting, while simultaneously overseeing another individual who takes care of the planting camp and plans field operations. Project Managers sometimes live in the planting camp, at least temporarily. At other times, they may be looking after more than one contract at a time, so they might need to bounce back and forth between various camps, or stay in a nearby town.

On a motel-based project, the crews are generally a bit smaller, perhaps ten to thirty employees. For a project of this size, the Project Manager is probably running the entire show, including both the traditional responsibilities of a PM, plus organizing day-to-day planning and logistics for the crew leaders. At some smaller companies, the owners act as the Project Managers.

It would be rare to see a PM with less than ten years of previous industry experience, and 15+ years of experience is more likely the norm.

Camp Manager/Supervisor

There are probably about sixty-five to seventy-five planting camps working in BC and Alberta each year, with additional camps in other provinces. The camps generally range in size from as low as a

couple dozen employees to as large as 100+ person mega-camps. Typically, 45 to 65 people is probably most common. Also, the size of each camp varies throughout the season. The population is generally highest at the start of the season, with attrition reducing the size of the camp slightly as the season progresses.

Each of these camps typically has a single person who is in charge, although I've occasionally seen situations where two people share this management role.

The job description for a Camp Manager could be incredibly long, or it could be quite succinct: "Know how to do everything, and keep the operation running safely." Having worked as the manager of large tent camps for several companies, I can confidently say that the list of things that I might need to do on any given day could be hundreds of items long, and wildly different from day to day. Basically, a Camp Manager is responsible for overseeing the daily lives and safety of everyone in the camp. I'll try to give a few examples in the next few paragraphs.

The camp manager is responsible for safety, which includes the implementation of the company's safety program, but more importantly, acting as a role model and watching to make sure that crew leaders and other middle management and staff employees are doing the same thing. Every worker should have the right to make it home in good health and in one piece at the end of a planting season, and the camp manager has a huge influence in ensuring that happens.

The camp manager is responsible for keeping the camp running. This involves overseeing the kitchen staff, and managing inventory levels for items such as potable water, propane, gasoline, diesel and other key items. They are also responsible for equipment maintenance and repairs, and for waste management (which is a surprisingly complex task).

The camp manager is responsible for seedling management. This involves ordering trees in time for spring stock to be fully thawed, scheduling deliveries, monitoring and reporting on seedling health, tracking inventory levels of each individual species and seedlot, and making sure that the correct trees are loaded into the crew trucks.

The camp manager is responsible for overseeing production schedules. This involves planning out the appropriate order in which to plant various blocks, which depends partly upon elevation and availability of prescribed seedlots and request keys. The manager needs to know the strengths of crews in their camps, and how to assign blocks to individual crews in a way that maximizes efficiency for the camp as a whole.

The camp manager is also responsible for dozens of other things, from overseeing use/maintenance/repairs of the camp's vehicles (often a dozen or more trucks), to supervising payroll, injury management, hosting workplace tours, working with WorkSafe and health inspectors and auditors, assisting with recruiting/hiring/terminations, managing human resources, conflict management, and dozens of other responsibilities.

Some camp managers are compensated based on salary, some on day-rate, some on commission, and others in a combination of these approaches.

A camp manager usually needs to accumulate at least ten years of industry experience before assuming this role, ideally including several years as a crew leader. Lessons in personnel management and production management that are learned while acting as crew leaders often translate well to managing the same areas in a broader camp-wide perspective.

Crew Leaders

Next, there will be crew leaders. A few companies refer to these people as crew bosses. For a long time, "foreman" was a common term too, but that label is disappearing out of respect for gender equity.

In a typical camp, there will probably be between maybe three and six crew leaders. In a motel show, there may only be one to three crew leaders. In some companies, each planter is permanently assigned to a specific crew leader. This is frequently the case in a bush camp operation. In other companies, the planters rotate between different crew leaders almost every day, with the project manager or camp manager assigning seats as planters show up to the trucks in the morning.

Crew leaders are responsible for production and quality on the blocks. The company may sometimes provide quality checkers to help monitor planters' quality and density, but ultimately it is still the crew leader who is held responsible when things go wrong. The company may sometimes provide tree runners to help with delivery logistics, but it seems that the crew leaders take care of this responsibility in probably close to 90% of companies.

A crew leader also spends a lot of time managing people. Some first-time crew leaders are surprised to learn that this is a significant part of their job. It's critical to be a two-way communicator with your crew and to spend a lot of time acting as a listener, to help with emotional and mental support for your team members.

Crew leaders are generally the main role models and behavioural guides in a camp. They assume a lot of responsibility, and often put in long hours to ensure the success of their crew members. Crew leads might get paid by commission (a percentage of the earnings of their crew members), on a day-rate, or a hybrid combination of both approaches. There are pros and cons to each, and what works best at one company might not work at a different company. I've seen operations where day-rated crew leaders seemed to be the best choice, and other operations where commission-based crew leaders seemed to be the best choice. Like many things in our industry, there is no overall right or wrong answer, and different situations sometimes call for different solutions.

A crew leader working in a camp-based environment where other crew leads work in close proximity and can help provide support should typically have at least three to [preferably] five years of previous planting experience before attempting to run a crew. For crew leads at smaller vet-heavy companies in challenging technical regions, such as the southern Interior of BC or coastal BC, a crew leader generally needs at least seven to eight years of planting industry experience in order to be an effective crew manager.

Checkers

Some companies employ internal checkers to assist the crew leaders with maintaining quality standards. These checkers will perform unofficial plots and check the planters' work, looking for quality or density problems. If they find problems, this doesn't automatically mean that the company's payment rate on the block is going to suffer. These checkers are able to provide immediate feedback to planters, before things get out of control, or they can go talk to the crew leader. Either way, think of them as a first line of defense with respect to quality issues. Many planters cringe when they see an internal planting camp checker coming, but in the long run, these checkers are employed by the planting company to ensure that problems are caught before the foresters come in to do their official quality and payment assessments on the block. Not all companies use internal checkers. In some cases, the crew leaders fill the role of the internal checker and do all the checking themselves.

Figure 24.02
Internal Quality Checker.

This checker is employed by the planting contractor, lives in camp with the planters, and works closely with the supervisor of the camp to ensure that all blocks are planted to the clients' quality expectations.

The most challenging part of a checker's job is to provide support to planters. The best approach is generally to be empathetic but firm. The quality of the planted trees generally doesn't need to be perfect, but it needs to be adequate enough that the employer receives full payment for the work completed. Therefore, checkers sometimes need to require that planters re-work certain pieces, to make sure that the quality is sufficient. Some people are not suited for this sort of authority role, because they feel hesitant to discipline a planter or hold them to minimum standards. Other people are not suited for this type of role due to a tendency to go on a power trip. Finding that perfect Goldilocks zone in the middle, where one is firm yet compassionate and understanding, is a rare trait. In order to be successful, checkers also need to quickly ascertain the expectations of the Client, and make sure that they're on the same page in terms of rules and enforcement. This sometimes

means a quick adjustment to checking style, sometimes relaxing expectations, and sometimes being more strict and unforgiving than usual.

Ultimately, the checker is there to support the workers, and also there to support the planting company, and to support mid-level management. That's a lot of support, and a lot of interests to balance. Usually, a checker is a great resource to help guide planters in meeting expectations, but ultimately, it is usually the crew leaders who are responsible and who must be accountable when the quality of the crew doesn't meet expectations.

Checkers are typically paid on a day-rate, or occasionally paid based on an hourly system (which usually only comes into play when doing extra work in the evenings or on "days off." Checkers sometimes have different names, such as Quality Checkers, Quality Control, QC's, and Pay Plotters.

Checkers typically need at least two years of planting experience before assuming this role. They also need the confidence to make decisions with conviction, based upon their understanding of the Client's expectations. It also helps to have a decent understanding of math, in order to see where the assessed quality sits at any given time. While some foresters "pass" or "fail" blocks and determine payment based upon a casual walk around the block, most rely on systematic survey samples,

Tree Runners

Other companies employ people referred to as tree runners (or tree haulers). These employees assist with making sure that there are boxes of trees on the block for planters to plant. This is a type of position not commonly used at coastal or southern Interior companies. It's a role that is most commonly seen at companies in northern BC and in certain other provinces, where access on the blocks is especially difficult. When a company uses tree runners, the crew leaders usually play a more central role in terms of quality control, usually without the assistance of internal checkers.

A few of the larger companies may occasionally have other worker designations, such as having a full-time mechanic in a camp, or a driver for special types of heavier equipment or tracked vehicles. There can be some variety other than the standard hierarchy of supervisors, crew leaders, checkers, tree runners, and planters.

Kitchen Staff

Even though I'm mentioning the kitchen staff last, the cook is probably the most important person in a tree planting bush camp. A supervisor has the most impact on how the season goes in terms of safety, organization, and efficiency, but the cook is the heart and soul of the camp, someone who nourishes and supports the planters. Planters may only interact with the supervisor occasionally throughout the season, but they get to speak with the cook at least twice every day.

Cooks have an incredibly challenging role to fill. Think of how much planning and work would go into a meal if you were cooking and you decided to have 20 people over for dinner for Thanksgiving or something like that. Now multiply that by three times the number of people. Now do it for breakfast (which starts at 5:30am), then get everything cleaned up by mid-morning to start baking (block treats, bread for dinner). Then once the baking is done, make another full meal that needs to be ready for 5:30pm. Oh, and even though you're "only" feeding about sixty people, remember that planters eat as much as 2.5 regular people, so you're making food for the equivalent of 150 civilians. You then need to get everything cleaned up by hopefully around 8pm, because you need to get up for a few hours of sleep before you're up at 3am to do it all over again. And I almost forgot something. Every couple days, you need to spend several hours trying to plan out the meals for the following week, then create a shopping list, then of course on the "day off," you need to visit seven different suppliers to round up everything from your shopping list. Oh, and don't let any of the frozen items thaw while you're shopping, because of food safety regulations, so you have to get the non-perishables in the morning, then the produce next, then frozen goods last, before you race back to camp to get the frozen food into the freezers.

How many kitchen staff are needed to make this happen day after day? Probably four or five? Nope. Two people. A typical tree planting camp has just two kitchen staff, a head cook and an assistant. These two people make it all happen.

If you have a good head cook, you'll be able to forget a lot of the day's challenges when you get home and grab a giant overloaded plate of delicious food. If you don't have a good cook, you'll still eat, but there will be very little joy in your life. The way to a tree planter's heart is through their stomach. I'm convinced that the difference between a great head cook and a mediocre one is a twenty percent difference in attrition rates throughout the season. If planters don't get amazing meals, they're more likely to quit. Food is fuel for planters. Most planters burn at least five to seven thousand calories per day. They don't just need good-tasting food – they need a lot of it.

Planters deserve amazing meals. The meals don't need to be fancy: A simple meal that tastes great and is nutritious can be just as amazing as an incredibly complex meal. Some cooks put too much effort into being fancy, thinking that it will impress the planters more. Sure, if you can pull off a complex meal, everyone will appreciate it. But they'll also appreciate a hearty and scrumptious meal that isn't quite as fancy.

A typical dinner should include at least two options for salad, a soup, probably some bread or rolls, and a main course with protein and two or three vegetable options. A pasta dinner is simple to make, but a cook shouldn't rely on pasta dinners a couple times each shift. Most cooks will also be able to cater to vegetarians and perhaps to vegans too with some side dishes specifically for those folks.

Breakfast is more challenging, simply because planters often don't have big appetites at breakfast, yet know that they need to eat a lot to get them through the day. A cook already has a handicap, fighting against a lack of appetite. Also, breakfast options get repetitive quickly. A cook needs to come up with a rotation of at least six different breakfasts (but preferably eight or nine) so the food doesn't seem as repetitive. You can't have the same thing over and over again. A good breakfast rotation will, at a minimum, include two or three things from this list every day: Scrambled eggs, hard boiled eggs, sunny-side up eggs, omelettes, bacon, sausage, back bacon, ham, hash browns, home fries, oatmeal, pancakes, French toast, waffles, crepes, croissants, bagels, baked beans, burritos, quesadillas, Frankies, breakfast pockets, and fish cakes. These are just the hot foods. Off to the side, there will also be cold items, with a station for cereals, yogurt, granola, fruit, and an area to make toast. There will be juice available, a hot water station for making tea, and gallons of hot strong coffee. Occasionally, you might even see smoothies at breakfast. A good cook won't focus all their energy trying to show off at dinner, because breakfast is incredibly important too.

The cooks are also responsible for setting out the lunch table early in the morning, so planters can start to come into the serving tent at 5am to start making their own lunches for later in the day.

Usually, the kitchen staff take care of cleanup of their own dishes (pots, pans, cooking wares). Planters bring their own plates and cutlery to camp, and wash their own dishes. The kitchen staff doesn't have time to wash individual dishes for sixty people, twice per day.

Good kitchen staff are hard to find. There are usually lots of applications from people who have broad restaurant and hospitality experience, but cooking in a tree planting camp is radically different than working in a restaurant. A successful cook will probably have some traditional restaurant line cook experience, some catering experience (helpful considering the mass volumes needed in a planting camp), and will also be comfortable learning how to trouble-shoot a dead generator or change an empty 100-pound propane tank in the dark at 3am. You'll also need to be comfortable driving a large pickup truck on logging roads.

Nobody should ever become a head cook if they haven't already spent a season in a planting camp in the past. Usually, you'd need to spend either a season as a tree planter, or a season as an assistant cook in a planting camp, before stepping into a head cook role yourself.

If you're interested in learning more about cooking in a planting camp, join the "Tree Planting Cooks Worldwide" group on Facebook.

Life pro tip: Check in with your kitchen staff once in a while and ask if they need a hand with anything. When they're constantly hustling and trying to stay caught up, they may appreciate that five minutes of help with something, and they'll also appreciate the social contact.

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