

3-STEP INTERVIEW GUIDE

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# Commercial Landscaping

*A practical hiring framework*

TALENT SOLUTIONS

*Specialized Recruiting for the Commercial Trades*

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## How to use this guide

Commercial landscaping recruiting spans account managers, branch managers, crew leads, and irrigation specialists. The trade is consolidating — PE-backed firms are absorbing regional players. This guide gives you a structured way to evaluate the talent that drives the firms winning in that environment.

This guide is structured around three phases:

- Phase 1: Phone Screen — 20-30 minutes. Goal: qualification and basic fit. Decide whether to advance.
- Phase 2: First Interview — 60 minutes. Goal: deep technical and motivational fit. Decide whether to bring to final.
- Phase 3: Final Interview — 60-90 minutes. Goal: culture fit, team alignment, decision.

Each phase has a question framework with industry-specific probes plus role-specific question banks called out where relevant. The Culture Fit Conversation Guide lives in Phase 3. The Scoring Rubric in the appendix gives you a 1-5 framework to compare candidates consistently.

## Three principles before you start

### 1. The interview is a recruiting tool, not just an evaluation tool.

In commercial landscaping, the candidates worth hiring know they have options. The interview is your chance to demonstrate competence, respect their time, and give them a clear picture of what your firm is like to work for. Run it like the recruiting tool it is.

### 2. Verify what you can verify.

Credentials, certifications, license status — verify these. Don't take a candidate's word for current NICET levels, EPA certifications, or state licenses. The candidates who are casual about credentials they don't actually hold are the ones who'll be casual about other things later.

### 3. Hire for the work, not the resume.

A great resume from a name-brand firm doesn't always translate to a great hire. Probe for the specifics. Ask 'walk me through' questions. The candidates who can describe their work in concrete terms are the ones who actually did it. The ones who give generic answers are usually filling in for someone else's experience.

## The interview philosophy

Commercial landscaping is consolidating fast. The firms that grow do it because they have account managers who own client relationships, branch managers who can run a \$5-10M P&L, and operations leaders who can build a system. Crews are important, but they're not what differentiates winning firms. Build your interview around the leadership talent that determines whether your firm is acquiring or being acquired.

### What this guide will not do

- Replace your judgment. The questions and frameworks here help structure the conversation — they don't make the decision for you.
- Eliminate bias. Structured interviews reduce bias significantly, but they don't eliminate it. Stay aware of where your gut reactions are coming from.
- Guarantee a hire works out. Even great interviews produce occasional misses. The goal is to dramatically reduce the misses, not eliminate them.

### Time investment per candidate

Across all three phases — phone screen through final interview, plus debrief and scoring — expect 3-4 hours of senior team time per candidate that reaches final. That's why the phone screen matters so much: it's where you protect everyone else's calendar.

# Phase 1: Phone Screen

## Format

- Duration: 20-30 minutes
- Conducted by: Hiring manager or senior recruiter
- Goal: Qualification, basic fit, mutual interest
- Outcome: Advance to Phase 2, decline, or send to a different role

## Opening (2-3 minutes)

Set the tone. Introduce yourself, briefly describe the firm and the role, and explain how the call will work. Something like:

*"Thanks for taking the time today. I'm [Name], [Title] at [Firm Name]. We're a commercial landscaping contractor doing [scope]. The role we're talking about is [Role]. I'd like to use the next 20 minutes to learn about your background, answer your questions, and talk through whether this might be a fit. Sound good?"*

## Background and motivation (8-10 minutes)

### 1. Walk me through your career so far. What got you into the trade, and what's your trajectory been?

*Listen for:* Look for coherence and momentum. Strong candidates have a story that connects their decisions. Job-hopping without a thread suggests either a difficult-to-please candidate or a difficult work history.

### 2. What's prompting you to look right now?

*Listen for:* Listen carefully. The honest version of this answer often reveals more than they intend. Watch for blame patterns, unrealistic expectations, or signs of being managed out.

### 3. What kind of role and firm are you looking for next?

*Listen for:* Specificity matters. Candidates who can describe what they want — culture, scope, comp range, growth path — are usually clearer thinkers than candidates who say 'I'm open to anything.'

### 4. Tell me about your current or most recent role. What does your day-to-day look like?

*Listen for:* Real candidates can describe their actual work in concrete terms. Watch for inflation — claiming responsibility for things they were merely adjacent to.

## Basic technical screening (8-10 minutes)

Three to four questions tailored to the role and trade. Don't go deep — that's Phase 2. The phone screen just confirms baseline competence.

### 1. Walk me through your last book of business or branch. Revenue, client mix, services delivered?

*Listen for:* Specifics on revenue, client types (corporate, healthcare, retail, HOA), service mix (maintenance, snow, enhancement, design-build).

### 2. Talk me through your approach to seasonal cash flow and crew utilization. Snow, mowing, enhancement balance?

*Listen for:* Strong commercial landscape leaders know cash flow management cold. Weak ones treat it as someone else's problem.

## Compensation and logistics (3-5 minutes)

1. What's your current base compensation, and what would you need to make a move?
2. What's your availability — are you actively interviewing elsewhere?
3. What's your geographic flexibility? Are you open to relocation, or is this a local search?

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*If their comp expectations are dramatically outside your range, address it now. There's no point in continuing if the math doesn't work. Be direct: "To be transparent, our range for this role is \$X-\$Y. Is that a workable starting point for you?"*

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## Their questions (3-5 minutes)

Always end the phone screen with their questions. The questions a candidate asks tell you a lot about how they think.

Strong signals:

- Questions about the work itself — what projects, what crews, what scope?
- Questions about the team — who would I report to, who's my peer group, what's the management style?
- Questions about growth — what does success look like in year one, year three?

Weak signals:

- Only compensation and benefits questions
- No questions at all ("You covered everything" — usually means they didn't engage)

- Questions that suggest they don't know what your firm does

## Closing

Be transparent about next steps. "We're talking to several candidates this week. You'll hear from us by [day] one way or the other." Don't leave them hanging.

## Phone Screen Decision Framework

Within 30 minutes of ending the call, capture your assessment. The longer you wait, the more details fade.

*Quick check: Would I want this person on a 60-minute deeper interview? If yes, advance. If unsure, advance — Phase 2 is where ambiguous becomes clear. If no, decline. Don't pass marginal candidates forward 'to be nice.' That wastes everyone's time.*

# Phase 2: First Interview

## Format

- Duration: 60 minutes
- Conducted by: Hiring manager + one senior peer (recommended)
- Format: In-person preferred, video acceptable
- Goal: Deep technical evaluation, motivational fit, probing for the things resume doesn't show
- Outcome: Advance to final, decline, or request a follow-up conversation

## Opening (5 minutes)

Reintroduce, recap what was covered in the phone screen, set expectations for the hour. If two interviewers, both should briefly introduce themselves.

## Deep technical conversation (25-30 minutes)

This is the heart of the interview. Use these Landscaping-specific questions to probe for technical depth.

### 1. Walk me through your last book of business or branch. Revenue, client mix, services delivered?

*Listen for:* Specifics on revenue, client types (corporate, healthcare, retail, HOA), service mix (maintenance, snow, enhancement, design-build).

### 2. What's your experience with the consolidation in the industry — acquired, integrated, watched it happen?

*Listen for:* Most senior candidates have lived through some version of this. Their perspective tells you a lot about what they want in their next role.

### 3. Talk me through your approach to seasonal cash flow and crew utilization. Snow, mowing, enhancement balance?

*Listen for:* Strong commercial landscape leaders know cash flow management cold. Weak ones treat it as someone else's problem.

### 4. How do you handle a major client threatening to leave? Walk me through your retention playbook.

*Listen for:* Account managers and branch managers should have specific approaches: relationship review, service audit, executive escalation, value reset.

### 5. What's your experience with national accounts vs. local? Different services, different management?

*Listen for:* National account work is its own muscle. Multi-site logistics, contract administration, KPI reporting are different from running a regional book.

## 6. Talk me through your approach to bilingual workforce management.

*Listen for:* Most commercial landscape crews are predominantly Spanish-speaking. Strong candidates have specific approaches to communication, training, and crew leadership.

## 7. What's your experience with snow operations? Weather decisions, fleet management, billing complexity?

*Listen for:* Snow is where many landscape firms make or lose their year. Strong candidates know it cold.

## 8. How do you handle a property where the client's expectations consistently exceed the contract scope?

*Listen for:* Scope creep management is a real skill. Strong candidates have specific conversations they have, not vague principles.

## Role-specific probing (10-15 minutes)

After the universal technical questions, drill into the specific role. Pick 2-3 questions from the appropriate role bank in the appendix at the back of this guide. The role-specific questions are where you find out whether a candidate has real depth in the specific job they're applying for.

## Behavioral and motivational (10 minutes)

Three questions that reveal patterns rather than skills:

### 1. Tell me about a time you disagreed with your boss. How did you handle it?

*Listen for:* Strong candidates describe specific situations, the substance of the disagreement, and how they raised it professionally. Weak candidates either claim they've never disagreed (red flag) or describe situations where they were obviously right and the boss was obviously wrong.

### 2. Describe a time a project went badly. What was your role, and what did you learn?

*Listen for:* Strong candidates take ownership of their part. Weak candidates describe what other people did wrong without acknowledging their own contribution to the problem.

### 3. What's the hardest feedback you've ever received, and how did you respond to it?

*Listen for:* Self-awareness. Candidates who can describe legitimate weaknesses they've worked on are typically stronger long-term hires than candidates who deflect the question.

## Their questions (10 minutes)

Give them real time. Phase 2 is where strong candidates ask hard, specific questions that signal serious interest.

## Closing

Be transparent. If you're advancing them, say so. If you're declining, you can decline now or follow up — but don't leave them guessing.

## Post-Interview Debrief

Within 24 hours, the interviewers should debrief together and complete the scoring rubric (appendix). Decisions made before the debrief tend to be biased toward the interviewer who spoke first or longest.

## Phase 3: Final Interview

### Format

- Duration: 60-90 minutes
- Conducted by: Senior leadership (often the President or VP) + cross-functional peers
- Format: In-person strongly preferred
- Goal: Culture fit, team chemistry, leadership alignment, decision
- Outcome: Offer or decline

### What's different about this phase

Phase 3 is not about technical evaluation — that was Phase 2. The technical questions here are minimal. This phase is about:

- Culture fit — will this person thrive in your specific environment?
- Team chemistry — will the existing team work well with them?
- Leadership alignment — does senior leadership see what the hiring team sees?
- Decision pressure — can the candidate handle a final-stage interview that signals real interest from your firm?

### Opening (5-10 minutes)

By Phase 3, the candidate has met multiple people from your firm. Use the opening to acknowledge the relationship building so far.

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*"You've spent some time with [Hiring Manager] and [Peer] over the past couple weeks. I want to use this time to talk about [the firm], where we're going, and whether you can see yourself being part of that. Sound good?"*

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### The candidate's vision (15-20 minutes)

Three questions that surface how the candidate thinks about their career and your firm specifically:

#### 1. Describe the kind of firm you'd want to work for in five years. Not the role — the firm. What's it like?

*Listen for:* This question separates candidates with strategic perspective from candidates who are just looking for the next job. Strong candidates describe culture, leadership style, scope, and growth in specific terms.

#### 2. What questions about us do you still have? What do you need to know that you don't yet?

*Listen for:* By Phase 3, candidates should have substantive questions about strategy, leadership, growth plans, or specific challenges your firm is navigating. If they say 'I'm good, no questions,' they're either disengaged or being polite — neither is what you want.

### **3. What would have to be true for you to look back in three years and say this was the right move?**

*Listen for:* Listen for specificity. Strong candidates can articulate what success looks like for them personally. Weak candidates give generic answers about 'making an impact.'

## **Culture fit conversation guide (20-25 minutes)**

This is the heart of Phase 3. The goal is to evaluate culture fit through structured conversation — not by asking 'are you a culture fit?' (no candidate will say no) but by surfacing the patterns and preferences that predict whether someone will thrive at your firm.

### **Working style**

#### **1. Describe your ideal manager. Hands-on or hands-off? Direct or indirect?**

*Listen for:* Listen to whether their description matches your firm's actual management style. A candidate who wants daily check-ins won't thrive in a hands-off culture, regardless of credentials.

#### **2. When you've been most productive in your career, what was the environment like?**

*Listen for:* Strong candidates describe specific environments and what made them work. Watch for mismatches with your firm — for example, a candidate who's been most productive in a slow-paced environment may struggle in a fast-paced firm.

#### **3. How do you prefer to receive feedback?**

*Listen for:* Some candidates want direct, immediate, unfiltered feedback. Others need it framed gently. Neither is wrong, but a mismatch with your team's feedback style creates friction.

### **Conflict and pressure**

#### **1. Tell me about the last serious workplace conflict you had. What was it about, and how did it resolve?**

*Listen for:* Everyone has conflicts. Candidates who say they've never had one are either lying or have never engaged enough to disagree. Strong candidates describe specific conflicts and what they learned. Weak candidates describe conflicts where they were the victim of someone else's bad behavior.

#### **2. When projects go sideways, what's your default response — push harder, ask for help, or step back to assess?**

*Listen for:* There's no right answer, but match the answer to the role. A senior PM who 'pushes harder' without ever asking for help may burn out fast. A senior leader who 'steps back to assess' on every problem may not move fast enough.

### 3. Describe a time you were under significant pressure. How did you handle it?

*Listen for:* Specifics matter. Strong candidates describe specific situations, specific pressures, and specific responses. Watch for candidates who describe themselves as 'thrives under pressure' without examples — that's usually a self-image, not a track record.

## Values and priorities

### 1. What's the difference between a great firm and an average firm to work for?

*Listen for:* Listen for what they value: leadership, autonomy, compensation, growth, mission, work-life balance, technical excellence. Whatever they emphasize tells you what they'll be looking for in your firm.

### 2. What kind of work makes you tired in a way that's energizing, vs. tired in a way that's draining?

*Listen for:* This is a deeper version of the 'what motivates you' question. The work that drains them is what they want to avoid. The work that energizes them is what they want to spend time on. Make sure your role has more of the latter than the former.

### 3. What's something you want to be true about your work that hasn't been true at previous firms?

*Listen for:* This is a powerful question. The answer reveals what they're hoping for in this move — and whether your firm can deliver it. If they describe something your firm doesn't offer, that's important to surface now.

## Landscaping-specific culture observations

Some industry-specific patterns to listen for during the culture fit conversation:

- PE-backed firms hire differently than family-owned firms. If your firm is one or the other, look for candidates who'll thrive in that culture specifically.
- Many commercial landscape leaders have lived through acquisitions. Their candor about that experience tells you a lot about what they want in their next role.
- Bilingual capability is often a core requirement for crew-facing roles. Verify candidly without making it awkward.

## Closing the interview (5-10 minutes)

Be honest about timing. "You'll hear from us by [day] with a decision." Then make sure that's what happens.

If you know in the room that you want to make an offer, don't always blurt it out — but signal strongly. "This conversation has reinforced what we were hoping it would. We'll be in touch quickly."

# Scoring rubric and decision framework

Use this rubric to evaluate candidates consistently. Score each category on a 1-5 scale. Total scores aren't decisive on their own, but patterns across the rubric should drive the decision.

## Scoring scale

Score	Description
1	Significant concern. Below requirements for the role.
2	Some concern. Gaps that would require investment to close.
3	Meets requirements. Solid baseline for the role.
4	Exceeds requirements. Strong fit, will perform above average.
5	Exceptional. Top-tier candidate, will elevate the team.

## Evaluation categories

Category	Weight	Description	Score
Technical depth	Heavy	Demonstrated depth in commercial landscaping-specific work. Specific equipment, systems, projects.	___ / 5
Role fit	Heavy	Match between the candidate's experience and the specific responsibilities of this role.	___ / 5
Communication	Medium	Clarity in describing complex work. Listening skills. Diplomacy when probed.	___ / 5
Leadership / collaboration	Medium	Adjusted by role — for ICs, collaboration; for managers, leadership of others.	___ / 5
Cultural alignment	Heavy	Working style, communication preferences, conflict patterns matched to your firm.	___ / 5
Motivation	Medium	Clarity on what they want next. Realistic expectations. Genuine interest in your firm specifically.	___ / 5
Credentials / certifications	Pass/fail	Verified credentials match the role requirements. No bluffing.	___ / 5

## Decision framework

Use these patterns to translate scores into decisions:

### Strong hire (offer immediately)

- 4 or 5 in Technical depth, Role fit, AND Cultural alignment

- No category scored below 3
- Credentials verified and meet requirements

### Hire (offer after final discussion)

- 3 or 4 in Technical depth, Role fit, AND Cultural alignment
- At most one category scored at 2
- Credentials verified

### Maybe (have a follow-up conversation or decline)

- Mixed scores with both 4s and 2s
- Cultural alignment unclear
- Some credential gaps that may be closeable

### No hire

- Any category scored at 1
- Multiple categories at 2
- Credential gaps that don't have a path to closure
- Any pattern that suggests dishonesty about background

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*The most important rule: when interviewers strongly disagree about a candidate, that's data. The disagreement itself is information. Find out why one interviewer saw the candidate one way and another saw them differently. The truth is usually in there.*

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## Appendix: Role-specific question banks

The 10 most-recruited positions in commercial landscaping, with 3-5 role-specific probing questions each. Use these in Phase 2 (First Interview) after the universal technical questions.

### 1. Account Manager

4. What's the size of your current book of business? Revenue, number of accounts?
5. Walk me through how you'd handle a \$250K account threatening to leave.
6. How do you grow accounts year over year — what's your playbook?
7. What's your relationship with operations and crews? Adversarial or collaborative?

### 2. Branch Manager

8. What's the size of branch you've run? Revenue, headcount, P&L responsibility?
9. Walk me through your approach to branch financial targets.
10. How do you build a leadership bench in a branch?
11. What's your experience with corporate integration after an acquisition?

### 3. Operations Manager

12. How many crews do you typically manage? What's your dispatch and routing approach?
13. Walk me through your equipment maintenance program.
14. How do you handle a crew leader who's consistently behind schedule?
15. What's your KPIs for crew productivity and quality?

### 4. Crew Leader / Foreman

16. What's the typical size of crew you lead?
17. Walk me through your morning — start of day to first property.
18. How do you handle a crew member who's not performing?
19. What's your relationship with the account manager? How do you communicate site issues?

### 5. Production Manager

20. Walk me through your route optimization approach.
21. How do you handle a sudden weather event that disrupts a week's production?
22. What's your experience with production tracking software?

23. How do you balance crew capacity with new account growth?

## 6. Irrigation Technician / Specialist

24. What systems are you experienced with? Rain Bird, Hunter, Toro, Weathermatic?

25. Walk me through diagnosing a complex irrigation issue.

26. What's your experience with smart controllers, weather-based systems, water audits?

27. Are you backflow-certified? In what state?

## 7. Estimator

28. Walk me through your estimating approach for a major enhancement project.

29. How do you handle scope ambiguity in a design-build bid?

30. What's your hit rate on enhancement bids?

31. Tell me about a project that came in significantly over your estimate.

## 8. Sales Representative

32. What's your pipeline look like right now? Active opportunities, dollar value?

33. Walk me through your last \$500K-plus close.

34. What's your sales process? Qualification, proposal, close?

35. How do you handle a prospect who keeps asking for unrealistic discounts?

## 9. Horticulturist / Landscape Designer

36. What software do you use for design? AutoCAD, SketchUp, DynaSCAPE?

37. Walk me through a design project you led — concept to install.

38. How do you balance design vision with construction realities?

39. What's your relationship with the install crews?

## 10. Regional / VP Operations

40. What's the size of region you currently run? Revenue, branches, headcount?

41. Walk me through how you set and hit financial targets across multiple branches.

42. How do you develop branch managers into senior leadership?

43. What's your experience with M&A integration?

## Appendix: Landscaping credentials to verify

These are the credentials, certifications, and licenses to verify during the interview process. Don't take a candidate's word for any of these — verify directly with the issuing body, the previous employer, or by reviewing the actual document.

- Pesticide applicator license (state-specific). Required for many enhancement and turf services.
- Backflow tester certification for irrigation specialists.
- Certified Landscape Professional (CLP) or similar industry credential.
- OSHA 10 minimum for field roles.
- CDL for crew leaders managing equipment hauling.
- Bilingual capability is often a core requirement, not a credential — verify candidly.

### How to verify

- Ask the candidate to bring or send copies of credentials before the final interview
- For state licenses, look up status directly on the state licensing board's website
- For NICET, EPA 608, or similar national certifications, you can verify through the issuing body's online verification system
- For manufacturer certifications, contact the manufacturer's training program
- If a credential is critical to the role and can't be verified, treat that as a hard stop

## A final note

Hiring is hard. The interview is your best chance to make a good decision before you make a commitment that's hard to undo. Use this guide to structure the conversations, but trust your judgment when the data is unclear.

If a candidate looks great on paper but something feels off in person, that signal is worth taking seriously. If a candidate looks marginal on paper but shows up better than the resume suggests, that's worth taking seriously too. The interview is your chance to see what the resume doesn't show.

Run the process well, respect the candidate's time, and make decisions decisively. The candidates worth hiring are watching how you run this process — and they'll judge your firm by how you run it.

Good luck with the hire.

— *Talent Solutions*

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