

Scouting For Employees: When The Demand Is High, And The Supply Low, Shop Owners And Industry Experts Agree It Takes Hard Work.



by Monica Buchholz

Debi Conde relies on apprenticeship programs. Bob Merrill uses classified ads and a road sign in front of his business. Jerry Orlando says a prayer. These three shop owners are part of an industry in desperate need of capable technicians, and an industry that doesn't have a prescribed formula for fixing the problem. "There is no relief in sight. Everyone has to help themselves," said Ron Weiner, president of the [National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence \(ASE\)](#).

Although no one really knows for sure, there are approximately 650,000 automotive technicians. According to ASE, the Department of Commerce predicts a 12 percent annual attrition rate for this type of work. Even if school enrollments were at maximum capacity, the demand would still exceed the supply, said Weiner. His advice to shop owners: think of it like baseball and scout for potential employees all the time.

Educational Institutions

Shop owners and industry experts agree that high schools can be a source for new employees. Conde, who is co-owner of Automotive Diagnostic Services Inc., Brandon, Fla., makes regular visits to the local high schools and participates in Career Days to let students know about employment opportunities in automotive service.

"If you develop a relationship with high schools, you will be on top of the school's preferred list and they'll send you their best students," said Mel Kleiman, co-founder and director of Humetrics, a firm that offers human resource development services. However, shops that get employees from local high students must be prepared to budget both money and staff to train these employees.

Apprenticeship programs and school-to-work programs are also valuable sources for new employees. Through a new Apprenticeship Training Program in Michigan, seven students who are enrolled in courses at Kent County Skill Center or Ferris State College will also receive hands-on education in seven participating shops. The Independent Technicians Education Coalition (ITEC) Program at Renton Technical College, in Seattle, Wash., asks shops to sponsor ITEC students for hands-on education in addition to their classroom instruction. The Transportation 2000 Internship Program, offered by Tulsa Technology Center, Tulsa Public Schools and Tulsa Junior College in conjunction with industry partners, strives to prepare interns for work in the automotive, diesel or auto body industry.

Any educational institution certified by ASE is also a source for employees. The automotive curriculum at an ASE-certified high school, community college, area vocational school or private institution has been evaluated and deemed to meet nationally accepted industry standards by the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation (NATEF). Within the United States, there are 1,071 schools with ASE-certification. This list may be obtained from NATEF at (703) 713-0100.

Within The Ranks

A shop should use its employees, customers and vendors to help find good people. "The biggest source within the workplace is the people who work with you ... who they know," said Kleiman. Orlando, whose business is J&L Collision Inc., in Roseville, Mich., just hired a new employee through a word-of-mouth referral from a current employee. Kleiman also recommends that shop owners call employees who have left the business to inquire about their interest in returning to the shop. "About 20 percent of those who leave a business will come back if they are asked," said Kleiman.

"The real key is are you an employer of choice? Do good people want to work for you? Would you work for you?" added Kleiman. Merrill, whose shop is Horsepower Autocare, in Windham, Maine, has a new employee who said he chose Merrill's business because it is clean, has the proper equipment and offers a 401K plan.

Other Industries

There are opportunities to find employees by looking at other industries, especially those that are downsizing. "Get in touch with the local military base, if one exists in your area," said Weiner. Pete Hunt, executive director for the Automotive Service Association (ASA) of Washington is on the Clover Park Technical College General Advisory Committee to help draft a Worker Retraining Implementation Plan. It will retrain people who are unemployed due to downturns in aerospace, timber and other traditional industries in the state of Washington. The plan targets programs that will assist students in areas of high demand jobs and high wages, including auto body and automotive technicians.

Weiner also recommends that shops get involved with street rod, hot rod and racing events because people who attend these events usually have worked on and enjoy cars.

Employment Networks

In Colorado, shops and technicians can use the services of an employment network - Automotive Personnel Inc. The company started seven years ago and has built a database of 980 shops and 1,200 technicians in Colorado. The goal of the network is to match the technician and his skill level with the right job.

Shops pay an annual fee to have a profile of their business in the network. Technicians do not pay a fee to be part of the database, which includes a profile of the technician, including ASE certifications, past work history and references. If a technician is matched with an employer, the technician pays \$25 per week for 10 weeks. "A lot of the shops - especially the high-end ones - have started to pay the \$250 fee for the technicians," said

Sterling Lee, president of the company. "On any given day, 50 to 70 shops are looking for technicians, and the ratio of jobs available to techs available is quite high," he said.

Employment Classifieds

There are still traditional ways to find employees, such as through classified advertising in local newspapers. Some treat it as an opportunity not to be overlooked, while others have had little success with classified advertising. Bob Cooper, president of Elite Business Services, an automotive support program, recommends that shops use weekend or Monday editions to run Help Wanted ads, and that the ad copy shows the opportunities of the position and business. Kleiman's advice for those using classified advertising is to think about placing the ad in business headings other than automotive. His experience has been that these alternative ads draw more candidates, especially when recruiting in areas where the demand is high and the supply low.

The Internet provides a source for potential employees and some Web sites have set up classified advertising sections specifically for automotive technicians. ASA's [Employment Classified](#) section allows technicians to post their resumes and shops to post their open positions, both at no cost. Many of the larger newspapers are also now putting their classified advertising sections on the Internet, which broadens the exposure of traditional Help Wanted ads. Merrill speaks of a friend in the business in Maine who just hired somebody from California. He found the employee by using the Internet.

With the intensity of the demand far exceeding the supply, Cooper encourages shops to have a well-defined recruiting program. The program should include a marketing piece that shows why people would want to join the company, job descriptions and compensation packages. "You have to really work to find employees," said Cooper.

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