



Professional Technician Development Committee Information Report: 2006-3

Technician Retention and Recruitment: Challenges and Opportunities

Developed by the Technology & Maintenance Council's (TMC)
Professional Technician Development Committee

ABSTRACT

Recruiting and retaining qualified commercial vehicle technicians has become a very challenging task. Aside from purely economic factors, the reasons for this are fourfold:

1. Society has a negative view of the professional technician career path.
2. Guidance counselors and parents, as a result, do not encourage young adults to consider a career in vehicle maintenance. Instead, students with technical aptitude are encouraged to pursue careers in other professions, such as the construction, computer and electronics industries.
3. There are fewer opportunities for young adults to obtain experience working in an automotive repair and maintenance place of employment. Thirty years ago, gasoline service stations featuring full-service and maintenance/repair operations were commonplace. Today, they are increasingly rare.
4. Vehicles have become increasingly sophisticated, leaving young adults either unable or ill-equipped to work on their own vehicles and thus cultivate an interest in automotive technology. This clearly was not the case 30 years ago.

Unless our industry develops a long-term, sustained strategy of growing the available pool of technicians, this situation will not be resolved satisfactorily. This strategy should consist of a two-pronged approach:

- Take actions to increase the perceived professionalism of the career technician.
- Expand the boundaries of the existing labor pool.

There is an expense to the program that this paper outlines. But in reality, it's an investment that will permit your company to continue operations in the future. Without an effective plan, fleets will suffer a chronic, internal technician shortage, or be forced to outsource the work to a service-dealer with the hope that they have time and personnel to work on your vehicles.

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INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and retaining qualified commercial vehicle technicians has become a very challenging task. Aside from purely economic factors, the reasons for this are fourfold:

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2. Guidance counselors and parents, as a result, don't encourage young adults to consider a career in vehicle maintenance. Instead, students with technical aptitude are encouraged to pursue careers in other professions, such as the construction, computer and electronics industries.
3. There are fewer opportunities for young adults to obtain experience working in an automotive repair and maintenance place of employment. Thirty years ago, gasoline service stations featuring full-service and maintenance/repair operations were commonplace. Today, they are increasingly rare.
4. Vehicles have become increasingly sophisticated, leaving young adults either unable or ill-equipped to work on their own vehicles and thus cultivate an interest in automotive technology. This clearly was not the case 30 years ago.

Many people incorrectly think that being a technician does not require a very-skilled individual. Partly because of this misperception, our industry is experiencing a shortage of qualified technicians.

To correct the situation, the commercial vehicle industry needs to take an aggressive approach to obtaining technicians. Old strategies, such as placing ads in the local newspaper, aren't effective options in 21st century North America.

Consider what really happens when a fleet advertises in the local newspaper or job exchange website. The fleet may in fact find someone to hire—satisfying a short-term prob-

lem but ignoring the long-term issue. Consider this individual hire more closely. Why is that person available? Often they are dissatisfied with their current position because of wages, working conditions, location or something else. Fleet "A" might have filled a need, but now Fleet "B" is looking for a replacement. The shortage has just shifted from one location to another.

TWO-PRONG APPROACH

Unless our industry develops a long-term, sustained strategy of growing the available pool of technicians, this situation will not be resolved satisfactorily. This strategy should consist of a two-pronged approach:

- Take actions to increase the perceived professionalism of the career technician.
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A. Fostering Technician Professionalism

Unfortunately, the stereotype of the "unsophisticated grease monkey" remains prevalent in the minds of a significant portion of the general public. As a result, many parents, teachers and guidance counselors simply discourage young adults from pursuing a career as a service technician.

The fact is, this stereotype could not be more wrong. President George W. Bush has directed that this particular occupation be a key element of the U.S. Department of Labor's "High Growth Job Training Initiative." According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics, industry will need 38,000 additional technicians between now and 2012. What's more, the Bureau states these positions have a high degree of job security, since changes in economic conditions have little effect on technician demand. Expanding the net to include automotive service technicians reveals between 82,000 to 164,000 new jobs will be created between now and 2012, reports the U.S. Bureau of Statistics.

The U.S. Department of Labor, in its “High Growth Industry Profile,” states that combating negative public perception of the industry and increasing awareness about the viable pay and growth potential of this career path are important workforce issues to address in the coming decade.

Industry groups, such as TMC/ATA, the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE), and SkillsUSA are already funding programs aimed at improving the professional image of the technician through voluntary certification, improved training, and national skills competitions for both student and professional technicians. However, these efforts rely on the actions of both individuals and companies to ensure success.

B. Expanding the Labor Pool

Traditionally, new commercial vehicle technicians have come straight from vocational schools. Our industry must now consider other options, such as those leaving or retiring from the military as well as those who have been displaced/outsourced and are looking for a new career.

The U.S. Department of Defense, for example, has created the Civilian Assistance and Re-employment Division (CARE) for the purpose of helping retired or downsized military personnel find jobs in the civilian sector. Information about this particular program can be found at <http://www.cpms.osd.mil/care>. Other local, state and federal displaced worker programs can be found online through commonly accessed internet search engines.

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration helps support a number of initiatives aimed at retraining workers to obtain jobs in high-growth occupation sectors, such as commercial vehicle technician. For additional information on these opportunities, individuals may visit one of several websites:

- www.doleta.gov/BRG
- www.careervoyages.gov
- www.careeronestop.org
- www.workforce3one.org

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Fleets and service-dealers can do much within their companies to foster technician professionalism by:

- encouraging technicians to obtain voluntary certification through the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). See www.asecert.org.
- participating in programs that celebrate technician excellence, such as the SkillsUSA annual competition, or TMC’s Professional Technician Development Committee (PTDC). SkillsUSA holds each year its National Skills and Leadership Conference, at which it hosts student competitions in various vocational skills. Local competitions feed into the national event. See www.skillsusa.org. TMC’s PTDC organizes an annual National Technician Skills Competition to determine the “best of the best” among industry technicians. As with SkillsUSA, corporate, regional and state competitions may feed into the national event, encouraging unified industry support for the initiative. <http://tmc.truckline.com>.
- helping to spread the message that being a technician can be a intellectually challenging and financially rewarding career decision. This can be done by reaching out to teachers, guidance counselors and parents through career fairs, media outreach campaigns, and personal contact.

In developing a such a program, companies should:

- Determine the level of technical skill needed to maintain your equipment.
- Consider the size of your company and what it can accomplish. For current needs, decide whether the required la-

bor pool for new employees and the scope of program should be local, regional or national.

- Develop effective materials to persuade potential employees and those who are influential in their decision-making process.
- Regularly participate in available school “career fairs” or “career days.”
- Partner with secondary or post secondary vocational schools to foster the type of trained students required. Have someone serve in an advisory capacity in these schools, for example. What’s more, companies should consider a mentoring or school-to-work program to help guarantee students employment if they need company standards.
- Designate specific managers to be involved at some level with programs that promote technician image. These programs are offered through ASE, SkillsUSA, TMC’s PTDC and state trucking associations.

A good place to start in developing a plan is TMC’s *Technician Recruitment Process Package* (Item Number T0532). It contains a well-thought-out plan on how to recruit technicians and it covers how to become proactive in growing the pool of technicians for the future. It also includes a “how-to” section with sample letters and a video targeted to students encouraging them to become a technician.

Guidelines for Establishing a Technician Recruitment Program

Each company differs in its management and operating style. However, the following generic guidelines can be customized by fleets to meet individual company needs.

First, a company must determine the future needs of its technicians, equipment, operation and facilities in order to maintain and grow its business. A company must be aware of future equipment designs and mandates that they

will have to deal with in both the short and long term. If company management understands these complexities, it can determine the needs, challenges and obstacles it will face in keeping and attracting the best technicians possible.

The following items should be used as a baseline for establishing a successful recruitment program:

1. Identify the company’s need for technicians and a goal for its recruitment program.
2. Identify what expertise the company’s technicians will need. Consider training requirements for new and veteran technicians. (If a company is not progressive in its training program, new recruits may make negative assumptions about their potential future with the company—hindering a fleet’s ability to attract and retain the best of the best.)
3. Determine the appropriate approach for recruiting technicians.
4. Obtain management acceptance for establishing a proactive recruitment program. A sincere commitment to technicians by top management will move the recruitment process further along the path of success.
5. Establish or refine the company’s outreach program for recruiting students at local secondary and post-secondary schools. Getting to students at the middle school level is key. Elementary school career day events are excellent opportunities as well.
6. Determine what incentives will be offered to attract and retain quality technicians. Some items to consider as part of a progressive incentive package include:
 - Tool allowance—Reimbursement for lost or damaged tools.
 - Tool purchase agreement—Incentive for current and prospective technicians to purchase tools as they enter the workplace and then maintain the necessary tools for technical and manufacturing

changes in equipment (i.e., specialty tools.)

- Education reimbursement—Incentive for training and continuing education to help technicians gain skills and knowledge needed for job success.
- Bonus for continuing education—Could be a bonus of the hourly rate above and beyond current pay structure, tied to continuing education program.
- Benefit package—Typical benefits include health, dental, prescription drug plans as well as retirement programs.

Guidelines for Participating in School Career Day Programs

TMC's *Technician Recruitment Process Package* offers details on how to get involved in participating in school career day programs. The following guidelines are based on the package, in an abbreviated form.

1. Contact the local schools in your company's area. Request that your company be placed on the school's career services list in the event they offer a career day.
2. Contact the career day sponsor in advance to participate in the program.
3. Use appropriate company recruitment video presentations. Consider using TMC's "What Are You Doing With the Rest of Your Life" video.
4. Be sure you have the appropriate audio-visual support equipment for the event—i.e., video/DVD, monitor, etc. Leave the monitor on the whole time and allow those who are uncomfortable talking to strangers to view the presentation. Ask students after they view the video if they have any questions.
5. Depending on the age of the audience, provide a handout or memento (give-away) with your company phone number on it to those who show an interest in your presentation. Mementos—such as posters, hats, candy, etc.—are great attention grabbers and advertisements which increase interest in your booth/program.
6. Display examples of modern-day truck components in your booth. Hands-on displays allow students to visualize the profession. If space permits, displaying an entire is even better. If space is limited, make your booth stand out by using banners, toy trucks, etc. Creativity is key.
7. Display a computer/laptop featuring a modern truck diagnostic program turned on in training mode. This allows students to try out the tools of the trade. If the program does not have a training mode, display a sample diagnostic procedure with appropriate pictures.
8. Have a presentation prepared if asked by school organizers to discuss why students should consider a career as a truck technician.
9. Have placards showing the potential earnings for truck technicians. Have handouts for parents available, too.
10. Let students know what secondary courses they should pursue in preparation for training as a technician. TMC's *Technician Recruitment Process Package* features a handout for this.
11. Provide brochures for post-secondary schools that offer technician training. This gives students the chance to investigate the schools, which are usually happy to provide the material.
12. Be outgoing, engaging, and prepared to sell the idea of becoming a truck technician.
13. For older students, be sure you have plenty of benefit package handouts with specific information about the company's coverage plans. Also be sure to have cards with the company's contact information and website. Listings of current job openings and applications are also good to have on-hand. Collect information from interested students so you can develop a prospect list. Use this list for follow-up opportunities.

CONCLUSION

There is an expense to the program that this paper outlines. But in reality, it's an investment that will permit your company to continue operations in the future. Without an effective plan, fleets will suffer a chronic, internal technician shortage, or be forced to outsource the work to a service-dealer with the hope that they have time and personnel to meet the task.