

Recruiting and retaining competent technicians

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With the sluggish growth or even decline in sales many shops have experienced in recent years, the technician shortage and recruitment of employees have not been the troublesome issue they were for the industry during the late 1990s.

But with the economy bouncing back to various degrees in different markets, and with shops struggling to continue to boost productivity to remain competitive, smart operators are keeping their recruiting skills honed.

Here is a look at how some shop owners are working to ensure they are continuing to attract - or create - the industry's top new talent.

Thinking outside the box

Mike Anderson said he thinks too many people in the industry complain about the shortage of quality technicians, but too few are actually willing to do anything about it.

Anderson, president of the 40-employee Wagonwork Collision Center with two locations in Alexandria, Virginia,

points to the difficulty the Washington Metropolitan Auto Body Association has had getting shops to participate in a program the association operates with GEICO Insurance. As part of the program, GEICO pays \$3 of a shop apprentice's hourly wage for 40 hours a week for one year. GEICO is currently sponsoring three such apprentices in Washington, D.C., area shops each year.

"GEICO says, 'We're going to pay to have you hire an apprentice,' yet it can be like pulling teeth to get shops to participate," Anderson said. "I think we all want a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but the majority of us don't seem to want to invest any time and energy. I don't think there is a miracle cure for this or a magic wand we can wave. We just have to really want to invest some time into it."

Anderson said the growth of such cable television shows as "Monster Garage" is reigniting young people's interest in automotive careers. He said he's worked to capitalize on that interest by getting an insurer to donate a totaled vehicle as a

recruiting tool for one of the six schools in which his company is involved. The school had the vehicle in its shop on a day when they were trying to recruit students into the program.

"We just got out the panel cutters and plasma cutters and things like that and just let the kids go to town," Anderson said. "It really generated some excitement."

He said some high school collision programs have been successful establishing parent "booster clubs" - similar to those organized for a school's sports or music programs - to help raise funds and ensure administration support for the programs.

But Anderson is also not one to limit his own shop's recruiting efforts to just local students and collision repair programs. He said police and fire departments often have people retiring in their early 40s after 20 years on the force.

"They love cars, they're mature and they have supervisory skills," Anderson said. "We actually have two retired police officers working for us that are doing great. They're not looking to make tons of money because they have an income, and they don't necessarily need the benefits."

Similarly, those leaving the military post their resumes on searchable Web sites (such as the Army Career Alumni Program,

www.acap.army.mil) that also enable employers to list job openings.

"And if you hire someone out of the military through this ACAP program, the military as part of the GI Bill will pay for them to take I-CAR classes, get ASE certification and things of that nature," Anderson said.

He has also successfully hired five overseas students through the Association for International Practical Training (www.aipt.org). Under immigration rules, the students can work in the U.S. only for 18 months, he said, but they may know others looking to come work in the industry from other countries that may have a glut of technicians.

"I'm not trying to steer people away from recruiting from the local vocational programs," Anderson said. "That's probably where 80 percent of my employees come from. But I think we need to also think outside the box."

Apprenticeship as solution

The owners of B & J Body Shop in Rancho Cordova, California, knew six years ago that they could sit back and just complain about the shortage of qualified collision repair technicians, or

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AROUND THE INDUSTRY

NABC donates over \$3,000 worth of used cellular phones

NABC's drive to collect old and used cellular phones was a complete success, said Chuck Sulkala, executive director of the National Auto Body Council.



"We asked all industry participants to bring their used cellular phones to the CIC meeting which was held on August 4 in conjunction with the I-CAR Annual Meeting," said Sulkala.

"This was our first attempt at putting something such as this together," stated Barry Dorn, NABC member and project coordinator for the effort. "All in all, we were able to collect sixty-one phones. These, along with their accessories were valued at \$50 apiece, for a total donation of \$3,050."

"The phones were donated to

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they could actually do something about the problem.

Today, they're reaping the benefit of deciding to take action.

"Our first apprentices six years ago are now among our journeymen teaching our current apprentices," said Dan Charlebois, the general manager and one of three partners who own B & J Body Shop. "If anything, we may now have more people in the apprentice program than we'll have places for, but when you hear about shops struggling to find good people, we're in a good situation."

Charlebois said developing the apprenticeship program has not been without its hurdles. The company's three principals - which include Rick Johnson and Steve Messner, who bought the business from its founders in the mid-1970s - first tried to use their experience in the industry to craft a program on paper.

"We started out thinking that an apprentice would do a certain thing for a certain number of months, then move on to something else for a certain number of months," Charlebois said. "The problem with that is, first, that journeyman technicians each have different strengths. It doesn't make sense to make every apprentice focus on

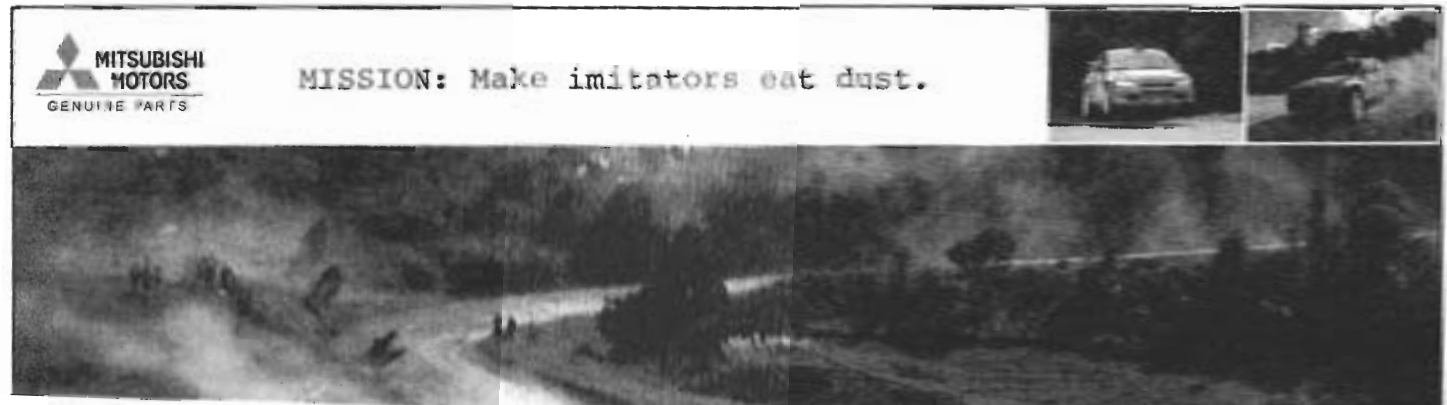
parts replacement their first three months if the journeyman they're working with is someone who excels at repairing parts rather than replacing them."

Instead, Charlebois said, the program has evolved so that each apprentice spends time with different journeymen, learning the different skills in which each of those technicians excels.

"The apprentices coming out of this program are actually some of our best bodymen because they've picked up something from every guy," Charlebois said.

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The shop also abandoned the strict timeline for becoming a journeyman as they'd originally outlined on paper. Some receive their welding jacket - a symbol of their completion of the apprenticeship - in three years while others do after four.

One-on-one

Tony Molla, vice president of communications for ASE, said no national television or advertising campaign would be as effective in recruiting new talent into this industry as face-to-face interaction with successful people in this industry.

"It's got to be a grass-roots effort," Molla said. "We won't convince people over a television set. You don't convince people with a newspaper article. You convince people one-on-one, talking to them about

the value and benefits we offer as a career choice for their children."

But some shop owners have been discouraged by the lack of interest they have found when offering to speak at local schools about collision repair technician career opportunities.

Jeanne Silver, owner of Butterfield Bodyworks CARSTAR in Mundelein, Illinois, said she almost accidentally discovered one way around this problem. She said she has had no shortage of interest in having her speak to students about entrepreneurship and small business ownership. She uses those presentations to also talk about careers in the industry as well.

Molla said shop owners are also fooling themselves if they think they're likely to capture the top collision repair students that a school is producing if they're not actively helping that school - because other

shops in their market likely are. Invite students in for a tour, to learn on a particular piece of equipment or to job shadow, Molla suggests. Help the school work with vendors to get the equipment they need. Sponsor an instructor's trip to NACE (ASA affiliates may be able to get an instructor's registration fee waived). Help the program get the I-CAR curriculum or earn NATEF certification to help it maintain credibility with administration. And join the program's advisory program.

"That's a small thing, but something everyone can do," Molla said, adding that advisory committee members are often able to recruit the program's top new entry-level technicians. **FB**

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AROUND THE INDUSTRY**BASF offers industry's only online instruction for painting plastic auto parts**

The Glasurit "Painting Plastic Parts" guide from BASF, now accessible at www.basfrefinish.com, is the only online program of its kind in the automotive industry. Previously available on CD-ROM, the guide demonstrates proper procedures for refinishing plastic auto parts.

Because today's vehicles include both rigid and flexible plastic parts, repairing the finish on them requires special preparation, products and processes. Determining whether the part to be repaired is made of rigid or flexible plastic is not as obvious as it may seem. The Glasurit guide enables painters to quickly identify the type of plastic by looking up the code, which is stamped on every plastic part, in the guide's database.

Once the grade of plastic has been identified, the painter must use the appropriate procedures and products. The Glasurit guide features a step-by-step demonstration that includes testing the solubility and adhesion of the original primer, cleaning and preparation, and the entire refinishing



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