

THE SEARCH FOR A GOOD TECHNICIAN

MAYBE THERE ARE COMPUTER-MINDED YOUTHS IN YOUR AREA WHO JUST NEED SOME NUTS AND BOLTS TRAINING.

BY CHRIS "CHUBBY" FREDERICK | CONTRIBUTOR

WE ALL have difficulty finding good technicians. One of my recent ideas was to create a video showing parents the financial opportunities that are possible for their children in owning a successful independent automotive repair shop. My feeling is the parents who are helping with the decision need to see a career path that could end in a successful financial future. Our industry could use seasoned technicians that could help us baby boomers retire someday and create opportunities for the next generation. I was listening to our service advisor instructor Randy Somers explain his theory on finding technicians.

Randy said nowadays it seems that kids are not getting into the business like they used to. I remember when every school parking lot was filled with old Mustangs and Camaros, and the kids who hung around talking about cars were called "motor heads." Those kids are the ones that ended up becoming technicians in our industry because they had a true passion for working on and fixing up their cars and trucks. Where do we find that person now? Maybe you don't. The hiring experience has changed drastically, and you have to change with it. Perhaps we can help.

Make Tuners Apprentices

Look around the school parking lots now and what do you see? Kids driving Mom's BMW sometimes, but also a lot of little four-cylinder Civics, Preludes, etc., and the group we call "tuners."



Now it seems that kids are all into computers, and it is hard to find someone interested in getting their hands dirty working on cars. My teenagers are in the group that you would call tuners. They are more interested in video games and computers than working on cars. They are being steered by vocational schools, mentors and parents to pursue the computer industry. Their idea of working on a car is to hook up a laptop to it and then start adjusting spark and air fuel mixture.

The more time that I spend with these kids the more I start to realize that they all seem to want to work on cars and, in fact, consider themselves pretty good at it. This started me thinking that maybe the shortage of technicians is not based on kids not wanting to work

on cars, but maybe it is based more on our perception of what a technician is.

My perception of a technician is someone who knows how to use his or her hands to do the "nuts and bolts" of our industry. After that technician completes an apprenticeship, so to speak, we decide if she or he is a keeper and send them to training to learn diagnostics or computers so that they will become an A tech. Maybe the shortage of technicians is due to the simple fact that we do not recognize what the new technician looks like. Maybe the new technicians are the tuners out there who already have the computer skills but need training on the nuts and bolts. Maybe it is just a matter of us embracing the changes in our industry instead of resisting them.

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“WHAT IS A GOOD FINAL STEP BEFORE ACTUALLY HIRING SOMEONE? TAKE THEM AND THEIR SIGNIFICANT OTHER TO DINNER WITH YOUR SIGNIFICANT OTHER SO YOU BOTH CAN SEE IF THE NEW HIRE WILL BE A GOOD FIT.”

CHRIS “CHUBBY” FREDERICK [ATI CEO]

After all, if we agree that the industry is changing, doesn't that include the people in the industry as well?

That thinking needs to start at the independent level and work its way up to training, recruiting and even high school vocational schools. This is one area of potential techs that we need to take advantage of. We need to point those people who are interested in computers toward the fact that the average vehicle on the road contains loads of computers. If we could harness that desire to be in the computer industry and tie it into the automobile industry, then we would have a whole new fresh group of techs entering our field.

I have had clients who say that they have tried these so-called tuners with their knowledge of computers, and that they did not get good results. That these so-called computer guys were not as good as we thought they could be. Well, I agree that if you hire someone that is good with a laptop and make them an A tech they will probably fail.

What I am suggesting, though, is that these potential techs have good computer base skills to build upon. With careful training and handling that they can become the best of the best. After all, how long does it take to become an A tech? I would say that you measure that in years, not months, so don't expect immediate results. Rather look at the long-term goal, and I believe they fit right into that vision. Proper training and motivation are all keys to successful employees no matter what their skill level is.

Slower Economies Help Independents

One of the biggest things in the financial news right now is the economy slowing down in the second and third quarters. The truth is that a slower economy is actually better for the independents than it is for a dealership. I take that information and couple it with what I hear from ATI clients all over the United States that they have independent shops in their town closing up also.

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Not that we wish bad on anybody, but we have a unique opportunity here. We can look at this as a sign that reinforces the notion that the end is near, or we can look at this as a sign that opportunities await. If the reality is that last year the search for a tech was hard, that they were not beating down our doors to get a job with us, then it has to be true also that not only are there more customers available but more technicians with the closing of all those shops out there.

Would You Hire Them Again?

One habit I have found that is very consistent in our industry is that we, as a group, keep bad people too long. Ask yourself this question: Is there anyone in your employ right now that, if given a choice, you would not hire again? If the answer to that is yes, I have someone that I would not hire again, then my next question is why do you still have them?

Now is an excellent time to look at replacing under-performers with over-achievers. The availability of technicians leaves no excuses to put up with bad attitudes on good techs, good atti-

tudes on poor techs, or even worse poor techs with poor attitudes.

Now that we have established that there are numerous avenues for recruiting technicians, how do we go about getting them?

Are You Ready to Hire?

One of the real keys is, are you even ready to hire? I get it; you are looking for someone now and have done the homework and the groundwork for that successful hire. Have you laid out all the things that will make that new hire succeed? Are you looking in the right place for the right type of person? My dad used to say, “You can't fish for trout in a catfish hole.” As for newly hired techs, you always positively must make sure that you start them off the right way, not let them develop bad habits that you will try and break later.

We have created a checklist that can help make sure that you:

- Are looking in the right spot for the right person.
- Have a checklist for the traits that you want.
- Have the groundwork laid for a smooth hiring transition.
- Have a training path to guide them to success.

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Chris “Chubby” Frederick is the CEO and founder of the Automotive Training Institute. ATI's 108 associates train and coach more than 1,150 shop owners every week across North America to drive profits and dreams home to their families. Our associates love helping shop owners who are having the same struggle as many of them have had, and who are looking for the same answers – and in some cases looking for a lifeline. This month's article was written with the help of ATI coach and former shop owner Kim Hickey.

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