



BUSINESS EDITORIAL - Training

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Developing Tomorrow's Staff

Putting training in body shops' hands with an in-house training program may be the best way to develop a workforce for the future.

By Jeffrey Koykar, Sr.

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Can shop owners expect qualified entry-level technicians to rain from the sky and land on their doorsteps anytime soon? Maybe...when pigs fly! Perhaps that will happen sooner than you think. I know one thing: If entry-level technician training isn't properly addressed, it could strike at the very heart of your repair business – the production workforce.

In 2004, I-CAR's "Snapshot of the Industry" statistics painted an alarming and dismal picture regarding technician shortage issues. However, some people in the industry don't believe there's a technician shortage at all. The purpose of this article, though, is not to debate the relativity or politics of these issues simply because some experts believe we don't have shortages while other experts believe we're headed toward a full-blown pandemic. The resolution ultimately will be decided by you and which side of the fence you're on and the course of action you deem necessary for your business's future survival and prosperity. I merely wish to pose provocative questions, scenarios and possible solutions.

Too Little Time?

Why has apprenticeship training failed so miserably in the collision repair industry? The answer to that is easy: Shop owners are too busy to address it. You're in business to repair vehicles. It's a full-time commitment on behalf of all your employees to produce quality services that meet the standards you've set for your customers and insurance partners. You don't have the time or resources to commit to apprentice training, so you outsource that responsibility.

Perhaps you rely on a vo-tech program at the local high school or post-secondary level for the technical training you require for a qualified entry-level apprentice. That's mistake number one! No one can train employees for your shop better than your shop.

I recently attended a two-day advisory board meeting at a nationally recognized autobody technical college at the request of a major consolidator I've been working with to develop a customized apprentice training program. Also in attendance were a couple of top-notch local repair facility representatives as well as another major consolidator. The purpose of the meeting was to recruit top student graduates and also inspect the programs' structure and facilities. There was an advisers team breakout session at the end of the second day in which school officials left the room so advisory board members could speak openly and candidly about the program's strengths and weaknesses and then report those findings to school officials. Although the school was progressing, board members unanimously agreed that much of the training wasn't "real-world caliber." So, if you're relying on another outside entity to train for you, chances are pigs *will* fly before a qualified entry-level apprentice lands on your doorstep.

Everyone Must Benefit

Another reason apprenticeship training has failed in the collision repair industry is that it hasn't been beneficial to all parties involved.

The shop owner, technician and student apprentice must all benefit from the effort, resources and costs it takes to train future employees. If I could offer successful solutions that didn't involve the above-mentioned items, I wouldn't be writing this article. I would be sipping a tropical drink on my own private island in the middle of nowhere. My point is that it costs something to get something. The key is to make the effort, costs and resources much less than the benefits received. In doing so, the challenges associated with training become minuscule compared with the rewards.

For example, a shop owner decides it's time to train his own employees but doesn't have a complete program set in place (which, by the way, is much more than just having a set of standard operating practices). He discusses the plan with the veteran tech he chooses to initiate the training, but the veteran tech is tentative because he realizes there are pitfalls as well as benefits to training.

Still, he agrees to assist in this new endeavor. The owner places an ad, hires the trainee and pays him or her a modest wage. So off they go down the merry road of training and all live happily ever after, right? Wrong.

Chances are pigs will fly before this trainee becomes a qualified entry-level technician. Why? Maybe the veteran tech, although he has a high level of repair knowledge and skill, doesn't quite know how to effectively transfer his abilities to the trainee and, in essence, spends much more time teaching and training than repairing. Maybe the trainee, although bright, eager and willing to learn, struggles with understanding the duties and tasks he or she is expected to perform even though he or she has seen them done several times. Imagine the owner absorbing the cost of the new trainee until the productivity results outweigh those costs and then those results don't materialize. What if the trainee and veteran tech just weren't the right people for the training process? What if the training program they chose wasn't developed for a production facility?

Failed training can sometimes be more detrimental and damaging than never attempting to train at all. Its bitter effect may long linger in the mouth and pocketbook of the owner who now sees training as a hassle instead of an asset.

Training Options

So what are repairers doing to locate, train and employ quality personnel for their production workforce? Some aren't doing anything at all.

It amazes me that a large percentage of the shops I've spoken with about entry-level tech training all agree that there's a definite need for quality personnel. However, a majority of them take a "wait-and-see" approach, which I don't fully understand. Maybe they're the shops that will try to lure away trained apprentices from another concerned facility, but a quality training program has safeguards to prevent such thievery.

Some shop owners do nothing about training because they have a million important projects going on simultaneously and they don't rate training as one of them. Consolidators cruise the country visiting post-secondary technical training facilities in the hope of finding and outbidding a competitor for the few students who might be the success stories of those schools. But let's face it: If post-secondary schools were succeeding with supplying the industry with qualified entry-level techs, we wouldn't be talking about other solutions.

Some repairers have turned to training companies only to find that their program structure wasn't designed or created to mesh gears with the real world of collision production. Thus, it eventually stalls out and fades away.

Some large multiple location shops are designing training programs from the corporate level using education directors or chief operating officers who've never repaired a collision-damaged vehicle. They're no more familiar with the reality of the production repair process than the recruits they're seeking to train. The closest they probably ever come to the production floor is when they walk across it to go home, and even then they don't realize it's the most precious turf on the premises.

In general, many shops are still groping around for solutions. They turn to the industry grapevine that every town has, the local paint jobber who cringes every time you ask him if he knows of a qualified tech looking for a job. The jobber knows they're few and far between! When you realize what he already knows, maybe you'll see the light and implement a workforce development plan using a complete in-house student apprentice training program.

Three Must-Haves

Here are three key elements that are essential to making an in-house training program work:

1. You must have technician buy-in. Your skilled tech will be the person who trains, so his concerns must be addressed and overcome. Training must never interfere with the production process. In fact, it must enhance that process in order for the technician to buy into it.
2. Student recruits must be focused and committed. Candidates all across the country are searching for an opportunity to enter the trade; you just need to know how to reach them.
3. You must subscribe to a complete training program that encompasses all of the above and much more.
Remember: Training must be productive and beneficial to all parties involved in order to be successful.

Keep in mind that, as a shop owner or manager, you must be willing to take a proactive approach toward apprenticeship training. Complexity can be overcome by simple but creative solutions. Staying ahead of the curve and staying involved will ensure your success.

Jeffrey Koykar Sr. is president and founder of The Academy, a workforce development company specializing in the recruiting and training of entry-level technicians. His philosophy and proven training concept stem from the 30-plus years he spent on the line as a top technician. In his words, "You have to be a technician to understand a technician. This training program's success depends upon the techs who will teach it, and that's why effective training on the production floor must be viewed through their eyes." He can be reached at (865) 995-2228 or theacademyact@bellsouth.net.

Characteristics/Benefits of an In-House Training Program

CHARACTERISTICS

1. It's versatile enough to be suited to the individuality of any shop, regardless of size or operational processing.
2. It's specifically designed for a collision production shop and created to interact with operations and the people performing them.
3. It's structured to recruit students under stringent guidelines that require candidate investment, ensuring committed individuals who are heading straight down a definite career path.
4. It understands the expectations of training from all perspectives: owner, technician and student.
5. It's implemented in an uncomplicated, unobtrusive way that adapts to the way you conduct business on a daily basis.
6. It's formatted in a simple, easy-to-use fashion to monitor, test, grade, direct and manage student progress throughout the training agenda.

7. Its course syllabus and curriculum are simple, straight-to-the-point, step-by-step directional guides that are easily understood.
8. It's instilled with beneficial safeguards that protect your training efforts as you build a career path opportunity for the student.

BENEFITS

1. The strengthening and customizing of a shop's workforce while growing in-house techs for its present and future workforce.
2. The elimination of costly time and effort searching for qualified production personnel.
3. The addition of another profit center.
4. An increase in the shop's public awareness.
5. The standardization of repair processes and a gain in efficiency.
6. The quickening and stabilization of the timetable for growth and expansion.
7. Self-evolving and self-sustaining training, once established properly.
8. An improvement in team repairs. The training program is a strong foundation suited to supporting this. Team repairing increases the turn rate on volume, your consumer satisfaction index and quality control while reducing labor costs. Proper team repair induction into your production mainframe will offer tremendous value and efficiency company-wide.