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Stronger together – the gender barrier in the auto aftermarket is down

by Jeff Smit

The auto repair industry has traditionally been exclusively male dominated, but that is changing, perhaps not rapidly enough. Ask any workshop owner who has female technicians on staff if they regretted their decision, and you will get a resounding 'absolutely not.'

More importantly, interviews we have conducted with workshop owners and their female technical staff, usually end with, 'we don't know what all the fuss is about.'

Where once it might have made big news for a girl to sign up for a trade like auto mechanic, these days, the sight of a female driving a huge rig on an open cut coalmine site, or working as a chippie on a building project, barely generates a raised eyebrow.

Most traditionally male-dominated workplaces like auto workshops have become much more inclusive, for no other reason than that workshop technologies and diagnostic processes have opened up a whole new career world for everyone. Gender is no longer a tick box on a job interview form.

This is not about competition between male and female, but those who have made their workshops more inclusive report positive attitudes in customer relationships and work ethics. In fact, females who make their mark in aftermarket auto workshops are admired by fellow workers.

In Australia, as in many other countries, the gender barrier in trades has been demolished, and those who have engaged female apprentices find there is no specific gender differences in work standards or dedication to learning. As one employer put it, 'We look for attitude first and foremost – gender is really incidental to the employment process.'

Gender diversification in technical careers within workshops is a growing trend – slow, but growing. In America, a recent report revealed that about one in five persons entering the auto technician field in the last five years is female.

Not so many years ago, TaT interviewed several young women who had made names for themselves in the auto repair sector. One of them was the apprentice of the year in Queensland, making her employer the proudest man in town. He never regretted his decision, saying that enthusiasm and a willingness to learn were the most important attributes of any employee, whether they be male or female, young or old.

Another young woman, then aged just 21, was a gold medalist in the Australian Worldskills National Competition, making her the best young auto electrician in the country, and proving once again that females are ideally suited to a career in modern auto electrical.

Her employer was not interested in sexist comparisons, but he reported that his apprentice brought a finesse to her work, especially when working on wiring harnesses. He put it down to female neatness.

Now, more than ever, there are good job opportunities for women in traditionally male-dominated industries, and women looking for job security and good pay should consider pursuing a career in the automotive aftermarket.

One large Queensland auto workshop works closely with high schools to encourage students to undertake work experience in the auto trades. He noted that more and more females are volunteering for such work experience whereas once such a job would not be on their radar.

So it seems that the rapid technological advances in vehicle maintenance and repair has helped to break down the gender barriers, and once those disappear, the conversation reverts back to the essence of challenging diagnostic work.

It used to be accepted that boys would pursue careers in automotive because they just love cars. Has anyone noticed that girls have become as obsessive about their cars as anyone. It follows that they want to get more involved in the auto industry to satisfy the same urges that were once only expressed by boys.

A female apprentice recently interviewed commented, 'A good work ethic will get you further than any debate about the gender differences. It's a focus that doesn't need to be there. Surely it is about the industry having good technicians, working hard to keep vehicles safe and on the road.'

'The auto industry now offers such a wide range of opportunities, anyone can go anywhere.'

For both men and women, there is a huge demand for technicians in the automotive sector. With 20.1 million registered motor vehicles recorded in January 2021 in Australia, and an expected 22 million by 2030, opportunities for careers in automotive servicing and repair must grow to meet the demand.

Training organisations like TAFE have told us they would like to see more females in auto electrical particularly and this is being encouraged. Auto electrical in today's high tech, almost white coat environment is well suited for females, and the early starters are proving that they can be very good at it.

And as one employer put it, 'Encouraging gender diversity means we have doubled our potential pool of apprentices.'

The place to start is www.tatbiz.net.au/capricorn

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