



Technician shortage is crying out for a new game plan

by Jeff Smit

The vehicle repair industry is yet another victim of the digital age.

Young people no longer tinker with their cars, and that translates to a lack of passion to even consider a career in the vehicle industry.

In fact, car technology has advanced to such an extent that very few people, the young included, have even opened the bonnet of their cars. Pride of ownership has disappeared and home car maintenance just doesn't happen anymore. Cars have become just like white goods, to be replaced when they stop. But they still need to be repaired and they still need to be safe. The opportunities are great.

The cultural shift is not unique to Australia. In the US, larger numbers of young people are opting to stay away from driving cars, citing road congestion and cost. As well, young people travelling on buses and trains can stay plugged into their social networks without the distraction of driving a vehicle. The proportion of people in the US under 35 years of age without a driver licence had risen to 26 per cent according to the latest statistics issued in 2013. Four years on, it can only have gotten worse.

A recent story from the Motor Trades Association of Australia about the critical shortage of mechanics, auto electricians and technicians hit the headlines around Australia and sent shock waves into every decent sized workshop.

This is not a new phenomenon. The vehicle aftermarket and the motor trades generally have been wrestling with this problem for at least a decade, and nobody seems to know what the answer is.

So where are you going to find your future technicians?

The vehicle repair industry has always had a PR problem of course. There are too many historic images of 'grease monkeys' up to their armpits in sump oil and wrestling with stubborn bolts. Not a good image. Today, you could almost say that working on vehicles is a white-collar trade, or it can be for those with the appropriate technical skills.

While mechanical repair is still the mainstay of the average workshop, the opportunities for digital age careers in vehicle repair are huge. After all, the average high-end sedan from Germany is controlled by up to 50 computers. Smart technicians with the right skills are now in demand, but according to the latest employment statistics, they just don't exist.

So, who is responsible for this serious shortfall in talent?

It seems odd that as vehicle technology becomes more sophisticated and high-tech, a challenge to anyone with advanced computer and digital skills, the general appeal of all auto trades has fallen to dangerously low levels.

Just a couple of years ago, the situation was recognised by Auto Skills Australia, the national advisory training body responsible for developing auto retail, service and repair qualifications. They warned that many TAFE colleges were failing to teach the basics of vehicle network systems. The industry, their report said, was in catch-up mode.

Auto Skills was also worried about the low level of language, literacy and numeracy skills in vocational education, compared with the rest of the world. That's another debate that is raging in Australia right now. The education system is not delivering as it should.

But even with a range of new units of competency developed for the auto industry in recent years, most of the mechanical and auto electrical classrooms are close to empty.

The drop-out rate of apprentices in automotive training is among the worst of any trade.

The latest figures from the Department of Employment (2016) paint a dismal picture. Not only were there nowhere near enough applications for auto job vacancies, but most of those who did apply were almost totally unsuitable candidates.

In 2016, more than one-third of Australia's employers failed to attract any suitable applicants for their vacancies. There were on average 6.1 applicants per vacancy of whom only 1.1 were considered suitable for the job.

The ratio of applicants per vacancy continues to decline and the number of vacancies filled continues to plummet.

Taking on apprentices is still an option, if you can find them. Demand continues to outstrip supply.

It seems to me that this is a serious industry issue that can only be resolved by the industry.

It's a situation that cannot be ignored.

The whole industry needs to come up with a strategy to encourage young people to take up automotive apprenticeships or learn the range of new digital skills which might equip older employees to seek out a new career in the repair industry. The aftermarket needs to develop a program to bring in new technicians by forming some sort of automotive career program.

A program like this would work in conjunction with high schools and colleges. Students would be eligible for internships, which enable them to have an income and gain workplace experience while still in school. These types of programs already operate within dealerships overseas. We should learn how and what works for them and then roll out something similar here.

We need to promote the future of automotive advancements, especially the electronic systems. The typical path of a technician is to start as a maintenance-level technician whose duties include general servicing and maintenance before moving into electronics and then on to diagnostic work.

Let's get serious here. Whatever we have done in the past has not worked, so new ideas and programs are required. The aftermarket prosperity is on the line.

Until the big thinkers in the auto repair industry attack the problem with gusto, perhaps there is something we can do at workshop level. There's only one way I know – take on apprentices.

Sure it might be hard to find them, but use your young technician network to seek out school leavers with some interest in vehicles, and introduce them to your workshop on some kind of work experience level until you are both comfortable with the relationship. But don't put a work experience person on the broom, or get them cleaning out old oil sumps. Introduce them to the glamour side of repair technology. Show them what scan tools and other sophisticated gear can do. Fire up their interest in the computer technologies that run the modern car. After all, all young people are computer savvy and they might also be able to bring useful social media skills into your business marketing program.

By finding and hiring apprentices, at least the trade will be doing some PR of its own to change the way young people look at a career in auto repair.

So make it a new year resolution – hire an apprentice in 2018 and be prepared to train them your way.

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