

TECH ME OUT

How the industry needs to lure back recession-fleeing technicians



According to reports, car manufacturers and garage owners say they can't hire the skilled talent they need and, as the baby boomers retire in their droves, there is set to be a surplus of jobs going begging. Couple this with column inches on the fact that the younger, so-called Generation Z don't want to work in an industry they see as old-tech and oily, and the picture left of recruitment within the motor industry looks bleak.

But what about the experienced technicians who possess the skills to work within the industry but choose not to? A lot is being done to entice the next generation to join the industry; however, this does not mean the band of skilled workers who could potentially help the

motor trade prosper should be ignored.

During – and immediately after – the 2008 recession there were many slowdowns and layoffs, and vehicle technicians began transferring their skills and moving to other industries. However, while the turbulent years have led to a boom, up to 15,000 technicians are reportedly still leaving the industry every year.

EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

Through attractive taxation, regulation and labour flexibility, the UK remains an appealing option for vehicle manufacturers to produce vehicles, and research and develop new technologies. The revival of the UK automotive industry after the economic crisis

brought significant success to the sector, re-establishing it as a vital part of the economy. Accounting for more than £77.5bn turnover, the sector employs over 810,000 people. In April of this year, UK manufacturing of vehicle engines surpassed the one million mark for the first time on record and production rose by over 17% in this month alone. This upward trajectory is set to attract major inward investment and create thousands of jobs in the process. So the need to invest in, and train, our current workforce has never been more critical.

The automotive industry sits right at the forefront of technological advancements, with a constant search for fresh ideas and, over recent years, has received significant investment from



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the government and car manufacturers. The opening of new multi-million pound institutes across the country only goes to demonstrate the commitment the UK has to its automotive capabilities.

The realisation that in order to prosper we must invest in the future is already filtering through to all sections of the motor industry. The advances in vehicle technology will continue to affect vehicle technicians and MOT testers as they will be required to work on and carry out MOT tests on new models, regardless of whether they work for a large national dealership or a small independent garage. Therefore it is vital that industry staff are upskilled to keep pace with ever-evolving technologies. Currently around 1% of technicians are

qualified to work on alternatively-fuelled vehicles, but the market share of sales of those cars stands at around 5%. The disparity is already apparent.

AN AMELIORATIVE EFFECT

Technological advancement will affect everyone working within the industry for the better. Workshop staff will be provided with more efficient, high-spec equipment, and innovative technologies will add a new layer to the job.

Cars today are incredibly complex and the manufacturers are making it harder and harder to diagnose properly. People believe that all a vehicle technician needs to do is plug in a computer to their car and it will tell them what is wrong and how to fix it. This could not be further from the truth (see pages 46-47). The bottom line is cars are incredibly complex, computer-driven machines and consequently highly skilled technicians are in much demand, both for permanent positions and, increasingly, on a temporary basis to cover high demand periods. Investing in the training now will ensure that skills remain fresh, enabling such technicians to move between, and service, multifaceted vehicles effectively.

Understandably there may be concerns over who will pay for this training. Many temporary technicians are personally investing in their own training, recouping the cost through their high earning potential as a result of being highly skilled. For those permanently employed, though, motor industry training remains, in some areas, unregulated; but there are growing calls for the government to regulate all training, particularly as high-voltage electric vehicles become mainstream. Workshops under national dealerships are now expected to train their vehicle technicians to a specific standard, and so are beginning to send their

technicians on specific courses.

Independent garage owners are also beginning to wake up to the losses they could incur by not being able to service highly technical

vehicles, but also the return they will get on their investment by ensuring their technicians are trained to deal with the influx of high tech and electric vehicles infiltrating the market.

This is all the more important with Brexit looming as it could mean tighter restrictions on bringing in talent from outside of the UK. As a result, garage owners and automotive bosses are slowly starting to realise that they must focus on the retention of their UK workforce in order to succeed, and with this comes the promise of higher wages. Indeed, by way of affirmation, the automotive industry saw the second-highest salary boost in 2017 with a 10.2% wage rise compared to the year before.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Whilst the need for training is slowly being addressed, and salaries are now rising, everyone with a vested interest in the industry, from car dealership directors to garage owners, holds a responsibility to attract and retain vehicle technicians. Career progression and recognition are key indicators of job satisfaction in any role, and unfulfilled promises from bosses were one of the overriding factors for technicians leaving the industry. Garage bosses need to cultivate a change in culture and realise that their technicians are their greatest asset. In a recent poll conducted by my company we discovered that 75% surveyed said that they had been offered either a rise in salary or additional incentives, such as more training or flexible hours, when they handed in their notice. This demonstrates the reactive nature of motor bosses in trying to retain their technicians, and reinforces the need for proactively nurturing their workforce to ensure they are equipped to deal with what tomorrow brings.

The garage of the future will be completely transformed from the one garage baby boomers knew when they made their first step on the career ladder. But it is an exciting and challenging future which, with the right training and dedication, could bring fantastic rewards for the whole industry.

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