

Autotech Recruit is first place on the grid when it comes to placing temporary technicians into the motor trade. **Dean Gurden** met founder and MD **Gavin White** to find out how it all began

# TAKING TEMP TECHS TO A HIGHER LEVEL

**W**hen Gavin White, founder and managing director of Autotech Recruit left school, he hadn't a clue what he wanted to do, beyond earning some money. But as a self-confessed petrol-head - this is a man who's raced motorbikes around Brand Hatch and Silverstone - he probably always knew he was going to end up in the motor trade.

Which indeed he did. The route there might have been as circuitous as a professional racetrack, involving servicing watercooler machines, selling forklift trucks and working as a recruitment consultant supplying gas engineers, but eventually White found himself in a service manager role at Suzuki and then group after-sales manager. It was at this point that he spotted a gap in the market for a recruitment agency dedicated to placing temporary technicians into the motor trade.

"Unfortunately, the automotive industry had been plagued by a lack of MOT testers and technicians for about 30 years, which is mainly due to a lack of investment in upskilling our people," says

White. "I found it was becoming increasingly hard to implement strategy plans and make any money if we didn't have the skilled workers in place.

"There was also zero flexibility because 99.9% of employees working in the UK motor trade, certainly in the workshop or technical areas, were PAYE. Temporary or contract solutions just didn't exist."

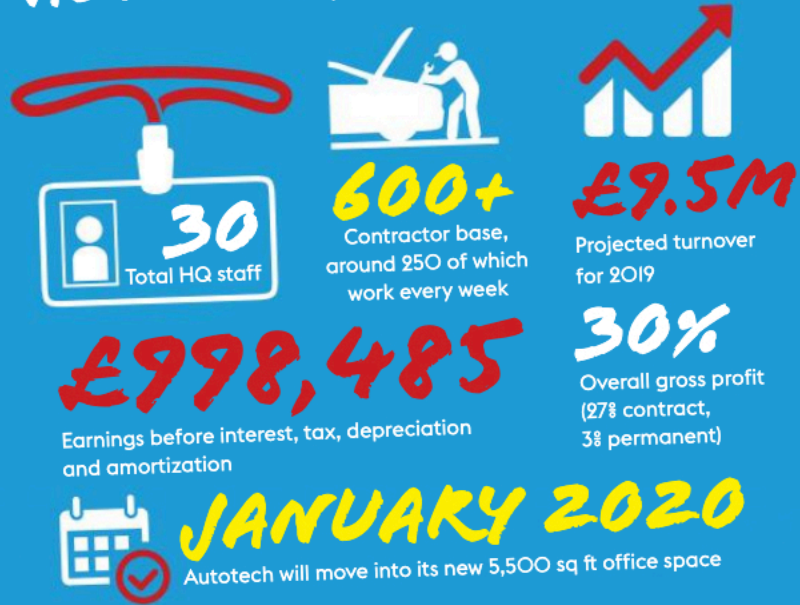
UK car manufacturing in general might have had lots of contractors, but it had never filtered down into after-sales. So White and two friends, Andrew Sly and Stephen Hughes, formed Autotech Recruit in 2010 to answer that need. "The banks laughed at us when we asked them for money," says White. "So I borrowed £40k from

my grandmother, Andrew borrowed £25k from his father, and we scratched enough together to get us working from home, with board meetings around one another's kitchen tables."

In the early days White approached the big network companies like Kwik Fit and Halfords Autocentres because they had huge national footprints and, as large organisations, a higher staff attrition. "When we approached Kwik Fit and said we could lend it technicians on an ad hoc basis for either a day or six months, it was a no-brainer as its business is almost entirely built around MOTs and its workshops," says White. "With the majority of garages moving to web-based booking portals, they realised they ▶



## AUTOTECH IN NUMBERS



needed to be responsive, agile and always saying yes to their customers in such a competitive market.”

### Competition, what competition?

The recruitment company has grown organically over the years and now has 30 staff working in its Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire head office and saw £10m in turnover this year. As to competition they faced at the outset – well, Autotech literally created its own market.

“Contract recruitment was almost never done in this sector before us,” he says. “A BMW dealership might take on the odd accountancy clerk to cover six months maternity leave, for

example, but they didn’t see the benefit of temporary contractors in their workshops. We had to point out that they had a vacant vehicle ramp, which could be them earning £3k a week in profit. All they had to do was spend a couple of hundred pounds a day renting a technician from us. It’s simple – either you keep your customers happy and earn money or you don’t get that ramp active and earn nothing.”

White had to go out and build the business case and show the workshops the opportunities they were missing. But as well as educating the clients on the benefits of using a contractor, it was also a case of educating the entire UK workforce of 350,000 vehicle technicians and 68,000 MOT testers to show them that they could work in a

different way. If they were professional, reliable and good at what they did, people would pay good money to hire them.

“A lot of our contractors now see this as their career,” says White. “They won’t go back to taking a permanent contract because we’ve done what we said we would and kept them busy with work. But it’s also not just about money – it’s about achieving and maintaining a good work/life balance. People want more flexibility these days.”

Autotech’s website invites its visitors to ‘join the freelance revolution’. “Using that tagline was quite a brave move for us,” he admits. “We never wanted to be perceived as an organisation that was stealing people away from the industry. People would start to think that we’re the reason there are no technicians because we’re turning them all into contractors.”

The reality, according to White, is that most of Autotech’s current contractors left the industry over a decade ago to work on the likes of wind farm projects and big government infrastructure projects that offered better work conditions and pay. “We went with that tagline because we honestly think we are winning people back into this sector,” he says.

### Inch wide, mile deep

Another thing that White believes they are doing right is taking an ‘inch wide, mile deep’ approach to recruitment. “A lot of recruitment agencies

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have their fingers in too many pies,” he says. “They are a jack-of-all-trades but master of none, and they tend to just chase the money.” White was adamant about sticking with one market and penetrating it as far as it could. “We get people asking us all the time if we can find a salesperson or ▶







## TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIPS

Autotech Recruit did a survey of 11,500 vehicle technicians about a year ago and the results were a damning indictment of an industry that simply wasn't looking after its people. As many as 70% of respondents said they had left their previous job because of broken promises around training.

As White points out: "There are 350,000 vehicle technicians in the UK and only about 5% have had any electric or hybrid vehicle training.

That's alarming, especially when you consider the Toyota Prius has been in the UK for about 15 years now."

Having spent a lot of time talking about how the sector needed to upskill its technicians, White thought it time he walked the walk and set up Auto Training a couple of years back. Working in partnership with industry-recognised training providers and awarding bodies, it aims to provide the highest-quality MOT and technical training services

to workshops and individuals in the UK's aftermarket.

"We do a bit of training ourselves in-house," says White, "but mainly we go out and quality check other people's training establishments, partners and then get preferential rates for their training courses. We recently struck a deal to give our guys access to e-learning platforms and in-house training around electric and hybrid vehicles."

warranty administrator, for example, but that's not what we do. Yes, we work within the automotive industry, but we stick religiously within the technical sector."

As for the dreaded B-word, White says Britain's exit from Europe hasn't really affected the sector until relatively recently. "Two years ago, we were still having record car sales in UK," he says. "The reason why car sales are down now has nothing to do with Brexit, but because so many people went out and bought vehicles on personal contract hire agreements. There are only so many

cars you can sell to people that are tied up in finance agreements."

Yes, clients are starting to implement recruitment embargoes and pull things in a little bit due to the uncertainty, he admits, "but this only started at the beginning of August, and cars still need to be MOT'd and serviced, regardless of Brexit".

White won't go so far as to say the company is recession-proof, but proudly talks up the fact that Autotech has steadily grown through one of the worst recessions in a generation. He also applies a seesaw metaphor to the sector. When people have

money in their pocket, they go and spend it in dealerships, but when times get tough, they go and spend it in the likes of Kwik Fit and Halfords. "We just pivot to where the demand is. If the demand is still out there, we need to make sure we're distributing to the right clients at the right time."

### Franchise drive abroad

White believes there are opportunities to franchise Autotech's services in Continental Europe. The franchise route makes sense due to what are often differently regulated landscapes and the need for somebody that knows the individual marketplaces inside out.

The company has also had approaches from as far afield as New Zealand, Australia and the US. "Even Iceland," adds White. "That's a place that's really taking off in terms of demand for vehicle technicians. We also started doing some work in Northern Ireland too and are looking at moving into the Republic [of Ireland]. We're obviously hanging back and waiting see what happens with the backstop and how the border is going to look."

It's probably the only thing you could accuse White of hanging back on. This is a man always looking to the future. "We earn good money out of what we do," he admits, "but we've never been greedy as directors. We've always invested money back into the business. We could all be driving around in Porsche 911s if we wanted, but it's about putting back into the business for the staff and the next generation."

White may not be driving a Porsche, but his business is well and truly in pole position. ●

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