

A Chicken-Or-Egg Debate: Too Few Techs Or Too Few Instructors?

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Is the industry's technician shortage really an instructor shortage? Are students who are interested in careers as technicians finding that they can't get the training they need because there aren't enough people to teach them? Is that why it is difficult for shops to find qualified young technicians?

"Based on my conversations with people across the country it is true that there is a shortage of automotive instructors of any kind whether it be collision or mechanical," says Mary Hutchinson, executive director of the National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation (NATEF).

But Hutchinson points to a chicken or egg conundrum: "Part of the problem seems to be that some of the training programs for instructors have gone away - some of the schools where they might have graduated with a degree in technical education - so there are fewer opportunities for people who choose to go into that field. The impression I get is [those programs are diminishing] due to too few students participating."

Further complicating the issue are the reasons fewer students are entering technical education teaching programs. One obvious reason is that teaching automotive repair pays less than doing repair.

"It's hard to find the right kind of person and bring them out of the industry where they are making whatever they are making and say, 'We want you to come in and deal with all these 16- to 21-year-old kids and we want you to make two-thirds of what you used to make - and spend more time doing it.' It's not exactly an attractive offer," says Hutchinson.

The problem of low pay for teachers is compounded by the problems of funding technical education. "The job is getting harder and harder to do every year - lack of funding, especially in the public sector, is a problem," says Bob Porazzo, a collision repair instructor who recently left his teaching job at Blue Hills Regional Technical School outside of Boston.

There's an instructor shortage because there's a money shortage, Porazzo believes. "Because of the money shortage, they try to get somebody as cheap as they can. Instead of hiring the best they can get, they look for the cheapest they can get to work for them," he says, adding that instructors who excel at their jobs are not compensated for the extra work or solid results.

Hiring instructors who are fresh out of school who have little experience or discouraging teachers with experience can turn the screw a little more deeply. "If a program is reduced to the point where they can't meet [NATEF] requirements,

then we won't be certifying that program anymore, but that doesn't necessarily fall on the experience of the instructor," says Hutchinson.

While Hutchinson sees the lack of college-level programs for technical educators as the root of the problem, it is the reliance on graduates of those programs that Dan Perrin, executive manager of North American Council of Automotive Teachers (NACAT), sees as the reason for the instructor shortage.

"Much of education is out of touch with the value of practical experience compared to academic experience when it comes to technical trainer positions. When I spoke to ASE about this, I used our newsletter as an example. It had seven ads in it for automotive faculty and six out of the seven required at least a bachelor's degree," said Perrin. "In reality, when it comes to automotive degrees, an associate's degree is pretty much the routine degree that technicians would secure." Because of the difference in degrees, a skilled technician is not considered qualified to teach in most school districts.

"There are hardly any schools giving four-year bachelor's degrees in automotive, and that creates a dilemma because you are asking for a person with technical experience and academic experience at a level that the majority of the people you are trying to employ don't have," says Perrin.

Even in school districts where experienced technicians can teach there are still degree-related issues. "Even [within] those schools that accept associate's degrees for a teaching position, they typically place greater value as far as compensation formulas on educational experience than they do on work experience," says Perrin. "A guy with 30 years of experience as a technician and an associate's degree might not be given pay equal to someone with a bachelor's degree who [has] no technical experience."

Perrin also points out that in some areas, even a technician with a bachelor's degree might be shut out of a teacher's job if they lack the proper educational certification.

The auto repair industry also plays a part in the lack of instruction, according to Neil Bailey, Pennsylvania state manager for Automotive Youth Educational Systems (AYES). Bailey works to place AYES-affiliated students in dealership shops. "Dealers are reluctant to take these students," he says. "At a dealership, productivity is the issue. Most service managers get paid a commission on what work is sold."

Bailey adds that once a dealership enters the AYES program they normally stay with it. One way he demonstrates the value of the program to potential AYES students is to take them to dealerships to meet AYES "graduates" who have been working at dealerships for several years.

In addition to stepping up their own involvement in internships and training, Porazzo and Perrin agree that shops need to get involved in increasing the educational opportunities available to future technicians.

“The best way to help is to get involved with your local state legislators,” says Porazzo. “Most of us talk the talk, but we don’t make the phone call because we don’t think it would make a difference. But a phone call from a group of people will make a difference to your state legislators. They don’t like getting calls, and when they get calls on the same subject they start talking about it and that’s where the change has to come from.”

Perrin agrees and suggests that changing the requirements could open the doors for a large number of qualified instructors. “The major problem is not, ‘There aren’t people out there who are technically qualified and gifted enough in the ability to present the information.’ [The problem is] they are not compensated equal to somebody that has a master’s degree, but has never worked a day in their life in the real world,” he says.

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