

Strategies to Gain Employees

Everywhere I go I get asked if I know where employees can be found. It is usually followed by a statement, “I hired this tech from a shop across town, but his old shop gave him a raise and he stayed.” Or “This appraiser didn’t measure up to what was listed on the resume – can you help me find someone that is ‘Plug and Go’?!”

I wish there was an easy solution, but there really isn’t. The latest information shows that the average age of a collision repair technician is 44, and 62% of the damage appraisers are over 40 years of age. So, when you are looking for “Plug and Go,” what are you actually getting? Most often it is going to be someone which will help fill the spot but not really give you sustainability. With this hire you might not only be getting experience, but also some unwanted habits. I’m not saying that hiring someone with experience is a bad thing, but I believe validating it is crucial. I see several employers that are offering sign-on bonuses to attract new employees, which has created a lot of movement between shops but not much to help the situation. Hiring someone from another shop does nothing to help the employee shortage; it is just a spinning wheel.

Another approach is to grow your own technicians by hiring through vo-tech schools or other training facilities. Sometimes when I mention this, I am met with comments that there isn’t time or the schools don’t give me what I need. I follow those comments by asking how involved they are in their local school programs. Generally, the schools welcome community input to their curriculum through advisory councils. If the school isn’t providing what you need, your participation can help improve their program. I also hear that the students in the vo-tech school are doing it for a hobby and not for a career. Every time I speak at a school, there is a least one student that asks if I could help them find a job, so they are surely out there. I was at a signing ceremony recently where every student that completed the program was hired by a collision center. By growing your own you can mold a person into what your business needs for sustainability rather than just filling a void. I know of collision centers that have been following this practice for years. Apprentice technicians they hired five or six years ago are now the mentors for their new apprentice technicians. Rather than feeding a spinning wheel, you are creating a perpetual process.

I also feel that collision centers could change some things in their hiring practices. As I mentioned earlier most are looking for “plug and go” without much room for flexibility. I was talking with the manager of a large facility who was getting people to answer his employment ads but not getting what he needed. He said he is interviewing good people, but they just don’t have any experience. Several shop owners that I have talked with, along with myself, see that as a good thing and won’t hire people with experience. To me experience is people doing what they know to do but maybe not what you want them to know. This circles back to the bad habit comment I had earlier about experience. Sometimes all it means is that they have performed the task for a long time and doing it the only way they know how.

What if you had an applicant that had good work history, could pass all the human relations related criteria but didn’t have any skills? I believe you could enroll the applicant into a community college program that would teach them the skills you require. This would involve some expense, but that could easily be split between the business and applicant and would result with a significant gain for both.

Finding employees is not an easy feat and the strategies of yesterday will not work today. The industry is rapidly running out of employees to poach as they are aging quickly. Growing a technician has some upfront costs but with good structure and a solid development plan, it is a very feasible process. Vo-tech schools that have industry involvement produce quality apprentice level employees that want a career in the collision industry. There is a bright side to the employee search with the variety of support programs like [TechForce](#), [Collision Repair Education Foundation](#), and [I-CAR's new initiative](#) that provide assistance to collision centers so they are not working through this issue alone. The key to this strategy is for you to be involved and support the programs that provide employees with an apprentice you can groom to meet your needs and expectations.