

Tech appeal

Technician shortage, good pay could draw more to auto field

By VELVET SPICER

A lack of mechanics—and the potential to make a six-digit income with a minimal investment—may have the automotive technician industry looking fairly sexy for students and older adults looking for new careers.

"There is a shortage, particularly of highly skilled technicians who have certifications or master certifications in various areas," Henderson Ford President Randolph Henderson said. "There are so many different components and (vehicles) are becoming so filled with highly technical and electrical components that it takes a lot of training to become proficient."

The problem, Henderson said, is that

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Photo by Kimberly Jackson

A Gates Automotive Centers technician uses a welding machine.

AUTO TECH

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most young adults are looking for careers in what may be perceived as trendier or hipper professions. Many are not considering automotive trades.

"I think automotive technicians used to be not looked at as a very glamorous kind of job. It was sometimes long hours and you could get a fair amount of grease on your hands," Henderson said, recalling a time when he worked as a mechanic and came home with greasy hands every day. "It just wasn't something that a lot of people aspired to."

But with improved technology and complex components, vehicles essentially have become mobile computers, some experts say, and the traditional "grease monkey" is a thing of the past.

"The misunderstanding is we have an image of people who work on cars as maybe not so smart. It's a dirty job. You bust your knuckles and bleed and why would anyone really want to do that," said James Fonzi, president and CEO of Gates Automotive Centers. "That's a misconception."

Whether it is repairing cars or working as a machinist, Fonzi said, if you take that path it is a path to a mediocre, at best, lifestyle—that, too, is a misconception.

"We have technicians here who make considerable money; they're into six figures," he asserts. "The other part that's kind of an unknown piece is a lot of folks that start out as technicians and end up going much further in our industry. There's a lot of other opportunities."

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2013 there were 604,990 workers classified as automotive service technicians and mechanics nationally, with a mean salary of \$39,450. Within New York, some 34,160 people were employed in the field, earning \$39,820 annually.

BLS reported 2,290 individuals working as automotive service technicians and mechanics in Rochester in 2013, with an average salary of \$39,520.

As the industry has changed, so too has the terminology. Most mechanics are called technicians to better reflect what their jobs entail, and most training is done both on-the-job and in a classroom setting.

"They're essentially engineers at this point," said Tony Ardillo, Gates Automotive's vice president of operations. "It's a lot more technical than it was years ago. We have a lot more diagnostic equipment."

A shortage of technicians can have a serious effect on dealerships and shops, who rely on a certain number of employees and hours to complete jobs.

Ardillo explained the firm's Gates store usually runs three technicians at about 50 hours per week. For the last several months the store has been short one technician. That means the company cannot take on as many jobs.

"Put that into dollars and that's a lot of dollars," Ardillo said. "So, everything we gain in the other departments here gets affected by the service department not doing what it's supposed to do."

Henderson has had similar problems at his Webster dealership.

"At times we've had to have customers' cars be delayed being repaired for longer periods than we would like to because of not having enough of the skill set to do certain things that may be in high demand," he said. "That's been an industrywide issue in recent years."

Indeed, last month *Automotive News* reported FCA US, formerly Chrysler Group, has predicted it will be short some 5,000 technicians in U.S. dealer-



Photo by Kimberly McKinnis
Casper Pizzo teaches Monroe Community College students Jessica Carney and Yovi Bruno how to check the vehicle's electrical system in MCC's Applied Technologies Center.

ships between now and 2018. As a result, FCA US has launched a program whereby lower-level service techs will be allowed to perform warranty work above their certified skill level.

Training available

Rochester has a handful of options for individuals who want to enter the auto technician field, including courses offered in several area high schools, as well as through the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services and Monroe Community College.

MCC offers programs for individuals interested in auto tech fields, including an automotive apprentice training AAS degree, an automotive technology certificate program and two programs geared toward employees of General Motors Corp. and Toyota/Lexus.

The cost of an education for a full-time student in the degree program is roughly \$2,000 a semester and generally takes three years to complete. In 2013

the number of people who completed the program who were in the workforce was 375; MCC estimates that those individuals added \$4.49 million in income to the regional economy.

Kristy Mooney Graves, program coordinator for the applied technologies center at MCC, said nearly 100 percent of the individuals who complete the automotive programs there go on to get jobs in their field, primarily because the program requires students to participate in a co-op.

"MCC's program was designed differently than most other automotive schools. Our students need co-ops, which is paid work experience," Graves said. "So they all have to connect with a garage while they're students and have paid employment."

The average salary of a recent MCC automotive tech graduate is \$32,000, Graves said.

"That's comparable to what some teachers make in their first year of employment," she added. "We're certainly

happy with that number."

The MCC program has eight main topic areas that individuals study, including specified segments on brakes, transmissions and engine performance. The school has the latest technology in both the classroom and labs and has a fleet of hybrid vehicles students can learn on, Graves noted.

MCC encourages both graduating high school students and adults looking to change careers to consider its automotive programs. Some 22 percent of the students enrolled in the program are adult students, Graves said, including a gentleman who worked on the manufacturing floor at Eastman Kodak Co. for more than two decades.

Competition for workers

Graves believes there is more competition for auto techs locally than employers may realize and that likely is the reason some dealerships and garages say there is a shortage of workers.

"I always say we don't turn out free agents. A majority of our students stick with their co-op employers," she explained. "Their employers put time and effort into them as part-time employees while they were students so they could grow their own workforce and have full-time employees."

Bradley McAreavy, president of the Rochester Automobile Dealers' Association Inc., works closely with area dealerships and said that while he may not classify what is going on as a shortage of technicians, there is not an oversupply.

Primarily, the gap between need and availability is a result of the necessity for highly skilled auto technicians, McAreavy said.

"The market for technicians, and the candidate pool in terms of what is available, is very thin," he said. "We're trying to draw people into the industry because there's always a need for highly skilled technicians."

McAreavy agreed that some people may avoid the industry because of old misconceptions.

"You wouldn't go into a new car dealership and go to too many service bays where there isn't going to be a laptop and some type of high-tech diagnostic equipment right there," he said. "You can't do the job without computer-based diagnostics equipment."

Most auto technicians will continue to learn and advance throughout their careers, shop owners say.

"We both allow people time and pay people for in-house online study, as well as sponsor them for advanced training that leads to certifications in different areas," Henderson said. "And we do provide in-house, hands-on training where we'll have a senior technician work with the newer technicians to help them in a real world environment."

Gates Automotive is certified with Mercedes-Benz and for elite certifications employees train at a facility in Houston. Technicians' pay is commensurate with their increased training and certifications, Fonzi explained.

New employees with degree in hand should not expect an \$80,000 pay check, Fonzi warned.

"But is it reasonable to think I'm going to come out of school at MCC and start at somewhere around \$45,000 or \$55,000? Yes, that is reasonable," he said. "Then if I apply myself and I take these other courses and I'm willing to get my certifications, within a few years I'm pushing six figures."

"You can make a lot of money and have a good time doing it," he added.

What the numbers say

Nearly 605,000 people are employed as automotive service technicians and mechanics nationwide. The total in the Rochester area is 2,290. Pay here is comparable to the U.S. average.

Employment per 1,000 jobs

U.S.	4.563
Rochester	4.635

Mean hourly wage

U.S.	\$18.97
Rochester	\$19

Mean annual wage

U.S.	\$39,450
Rochester	\$39,520

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

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