



Technician Recruiting and Training Case Study

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According to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) 2008 data, there were about 763,700 automotive service technicians and mechanics employed in the U.S. while diesel service technicians and mechanics numbered about 263,100. Employed largely by repair and maintenance shops and vehicle dealers, utilities that operate fleets and federal, state and local governments are also large employers of people in these vital occupations.

The need to recruit and train vehicle and equipment maintenance and repair technicians is a regular challenge for fleets. To meet this need, fleet managers are turning to a variety of sources and employing a range of effective practices and programs.

The challenge does not stop with hiring. Ongoing training and certification processes are also in place to ensure that skill sets are up to date. This is an important element in maintaining fleet reliability and productivity, and one growing in importance as new vehicle, system and component technologies are introduced to the market.

For municipal and utility fleet managers across North America, these processes are a regular part of doing business. Their stories illustrate several successful approaches.

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Sending the Right Message in the City of Troy, Michigan

“Ten years ago,” says Samuel Lamerato, Superintendent of Fleet Maintenance for the City of Troy, Michigan, “we had issues with recruiting technicians because we weren’t telling our story correctly. We corrected that problem, though by creating a video that showcases our facilities and our staff, and we took the video to proper channels, including community colleges, technical schools, high schools and auto parts stores. The last time we needed to fill a position we had over 100 applicants.”

Today, the maintenance operation for the City of Troy is fully staffed with ten technicians at its main facility, which operates two shifts on weekdays, and at a satellite location where one technician is on duty during the day. Combined, the staff handles preventive maintenance and minor and major repairs, including fabrication and in servicing of new units, for over 500 pieces of equipment. Included are everything from riding mowers to cars, vans, SUVs, pick-up, flatbed, dump and fire trucks, and a range of equipment such as road graders and backhoes.

“Our goal is to have at least 98 percent of the fleet available for use every day,” Lamerato states. “We’ve been able to meet that objective in part by right sizing our fleet, a move that has resulted in as many as 300 fewer work orders per year. In addition, a replacement program that is based on maintenance and repair history data is very valuable for knowing when to replace vehicles.

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“Strict adherence to PM compliance is also a factor,” Lamerato continues. “Even with extended intervals allowed by the use of synthetic oils, the majority of the repairs on our vehicles and equipment are done during routine maintenance. Every technician works toward the goal of keeping the fleet available. One indication is last year’s overtime costs, when we had one technician with just 20 hours of overtime. From May through November we didn’t have any overtime costs and this past winter the person with the highest number had just six extra hours.”

Making that accomplishment even more significant is that the City of Troy’s fleet maintenance operation routinely in-sources work from seven other area communities. Those cities and towns either don’t have the resources to maintain and repair their own fleets or have downsized their operations. Outside work last year accounted for just over \$500,000, and as it continues to grow, Lamerato notes, next year’s budget calls for filling two vacant technician positions.

“We’re preparing to take our message to the street again to find the most qualified help available,” Lamerato says. “An important part of that is telling prospective employees what they can expect. For example, we talk about the variety of equipment they may be working on, the training we provide and the certification they can earn, and how they can advance through the ranks.”

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Fleet maintenance positions in the City of Troy include service and repair technicians. New technicians must first complete a six-month probationary period and earn state required certification. Ongoing training is budgeted at 40 hours per person per year, and is completed in a classroom and in hands on exercises, much of which is provided by suppliers.

“All but one of our technicians is ASE Master certified and many have earned more than one certification,” Lamerato states. “We purchased ASE training videos and workbooks, which technicians can check out from an in-house library. Every month a master technician’s certification is current they receive a \$100 stipend. That makes it possible for them to prepare and test on their own time.”

The City of Troy’s shop, Lamerato proudly notes, is an ASE Blue Seal of Excellence facility, one of only two municipal fleet operations in Michigan that has earned that designation. “Training relates directly to quality of work,” he says, “and whether it’s for a city department or an outside customer the goal is the same-- to boost uptime and provide equipment users can rely on to serve our citizens.”

The 12th largest city in Michigan, the City of Troy is located in the northern Detroit suburbs. Troy is home to more than 81,000 residents and approximately 5,700 businesses that employ 125,000 people.

Finding Qualified Technicians in the City of Everett, Washington

“When we have the need to recruit new technicians for our fleet maintenance operation, the process starts with our Human Resources Department, which helps us develop an effective job announcement,” says Bill DeRousse, Fleet Manager. “Then we advertise in local papers and trade magazines and send emails to every fleet organization in the U.S. We have also worked with local schools and have hired second year students when we have needed more help.”

The City of Everett fleet maintenance operation employs 14 technicians, and four parts room and five administrative staff members. The department services 90 buses for the city’s transit agency and 850 vehicles for police, fire, public works and other departments in three shops, including handling warranty work and processing for all major manufacturers.

“We provide all of our technicians with 40 hours of training each year,” DeRousse notes. “Training can be on light-, medium or heavy-duty equipment and in specialized areas such as hydraulics or electrical systems. We have several training agencies in our area and through the Public Fleet Managers Association we offer training constantly on a number of topics.

“We require all of our technicians to be certified in three areas, including light-duty brakes, heavy-duty brakes and air conditioning,” DeRousse adds. “In

addition, we pay for any other certifications they would like to earn. The majority of our technicians are ASE Master certified.”

Set to replace one technician this year, the City of Everett fleet maintenance operation will begin the hiring process by administering a required civil service exam to individuals who are interested in the position. “Candidates must be ranked in the top three on the test to be considered,” DeRousse says. “Overall, though, we don’t have a problem finding qualified technicians.”

Located in a 32 square mile area on the Puget Sound about 25 miles north of Seattle, the City of Everett, Washington has a population over 101,000. The county seat of Snohomish County, Washington, Everett supports more than 87,000 jobs.

Ongoing Recruiting and Training of Technicians at Nova Scotia Power

“In an average year,” says Jack Abraham, Fleet Manager, “we replace one maintenance technician. In most cases we find and recruit technicians at local trade schools.

“We also work to support vocational and trade school programs by offering apprentice positions to students. In general we have two apprentice technicians on our staff, one in each of our fleet maintenance facilities.”

Nova Scotia Power’s full staff of 26 technicians is fully trained and certified, Abraham notes. “We provide new technicians and existing staff with training from manufacturers and parts suppliers,” he relates, “and everyone takes hydraulic training at an outside facility. We also have a Certified Fleet Mechanic designation for technicians that pass an exam administered by the Canadian Fleet Forum Council.

“We support technician certification to help ensure the efficiency and proficiency of our staff at all times,” Abraham says. “Having the best technicians in the business starts with recruiting and hiring the right people, but it’s an ongoing process as well.”

Nova Scotia's main electricity provider for more than 80 years, Nova Scotia Power, an Emera company, serves 483,000 residential, commercial and industrial customers, delivering power with 5,000 km of transmission and 25,000 km of distribution lines.

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ALL AROUND EFFORT

Although a steady stream of job openings is created as older technicians retire, employment of automotive and diesel service technicians and mechanics is expected to increase slower than the average for all occupations. Still, between 2008 and 2018, BLS expects growth of five percent in automotive positions and six percent in employment of diesel service technicians.

For municipal and utility fleets continually facing the need to recruit and train new technicians for their maintenance operations, finding qualified candidates is a matter of using a variety of resources and implementing a range of programs.