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Focus On...

AUTOMOTIVE TECHNICIAN



Graduates of TTC's Automotive Technology program like Nicholas Dubois learn to use diagnostic software to determine necessary automobile system repairs.

By CHRISTINE RANDALL McGEE

The field of automotive technology has changed tremendously over the years, from strictly mechanical labor to more computer-based technology.

"So much of automobile mechanics today are things you can't see," explains Clint Snider, automotive instructor at Trident Technical College. "There are still plenty of opportunities for people who do brake jobs or replace clutches, but over the past 20 or 30 years, cars have graduated to electronics. There are a lot of cars on the road being run by 20 different computers, so today's auto technicians are more like IT professionals, making this computer talk to that computer."

Program coordinator Walter "Buzz" Varella adds, "Our industry is not what it was years ago — nuts and bolts, changing parts primarily. Today you have to have great analytical skills and great comprehension skills in order to read and understand how all these systems network and talk to each other."

You can't just look at a car and see what is wrong with it, Snider says. "You have to understand how all the computers on the car interact. For example, when you press the window down button, it talks to the main computer which then sends a command to the window motor to tell it to roll the window down. But when it doesn't work, the problem is not something you can see," he explains. "The technician who is trying to diagnose the problem has to be an avid reader and comprehend what he or she reads to be able to apply it to how those systems work."

Varella adds, "Mechanics haven't been run out of the business, but experts who can take it to the next level, who can do the mechanical stuff and understand the electronics, those are the people who make big money. It is not uncommon for a skilled technician to make a six-figure salary. The nuts-and-bolts technician still has a great opportunity to make \$45,000-\$50,000 a year, however."

The automotive repair industry is mostly commission-based, he says. "The more work you do, the more opportunity for income. But you have to do it correctly because when it comes back, the next time you are working for free."

Both Varella and Snider grew up in the business — Snider's uncle owned repair shops and service stations while Varella's grandfather owned his own shop — and graduated from Trident Technical College, so they had lots of experience before taking over the Automotive Technology program about five years ago.

"One of the first things we felt needed to change was the lack of communication in the business," Varella says. "So we try to coach our students to communicate clearly."

Another important aspect is professionalism, both in attitude and appearance. Snider gives the example of someone bringing an \$84,000 car into the shop for repairs. "Any consumer is going to be more comfortable talking to and leaving his car with someone who acts and looks professional. You don't want to plant seeds of doubt in your customer's mind when you are asking for thousands of dollars to fix his automobile," he says.

The job outlook in the automotive service industry is very good, according to Varella. "We have been very fortunate that several local dealers and independent shops have reached out to us, and we have been able to place students who want to go to work," he says. "We do have some who

complete the program and decide they don't want to work in the industry, but finding jobs for the ones who do want to work is not a problem."

Snider says the number of vehicles on the road is growing by 3 million a year and cars are living longer, meaning more maintenance and repairs will be needed. "The average car on road is 11 years old," he says. "If you keep the oil changed and maintain it, it will keep right on going."

Some people feel they are pressured to get repairs they don't need, but the two think that is just not the case. "The truth is, you don't have to 'sell' people things," Snider says. "Cars just wear out. Anybody can sell windshield wipers because you can see when they have gone bad, but a well-trained service advisor or technician knows through experience what is going to happen when to a particular year, make and model."

Varella adds, "Cars have become more predictable so you know when things will need attention. You can give the customer a list of items and then you prioritize. For example, this one is a safety issue but that one can wait until the next oil change."

Varella says that most technicians that start in a dealership environment stay with that brand. "If you are a technician that starts in an independent shop, you may go to another independent or move into dealership environment," he notes. "But usually when you see someone leave a dealership to go independent, they are going to open their own shop, not to work for someone else."

No matter what type of car you work on, the basics are the same, Snider says. "Atmospheric pressure is atmospheric pressure. But how Ford uses it and how Chrysler uses it are two different worlds. If you try to use Ford testing techniques on a Chrysler you are going to come up with the wrong answer."

Varella notes that this complexity means that the individual must be sharp enough to be able to recognize and interpret the differences. That's one reason the two men are adamant about the importance of reading and comprehension skills. Before being accepted into the TTC automotive technology program, prospective students must demonstrate college-level competency in English composition, reading and math. If they don't meet minimum standards, TTC's Learning Center can give them training to bring them up to the college level.

Automotive servicing is a difficult industry to get into, Varella says, and once you get in it is physically and mentally challenging. To help prospective students understand more about the Automotive Technology program, they can attend a summer orientation session.

The orientation covers the program basics such as courses and books, along with tool requirements. Each student must have his or her own set of tools which can run from \$1,800 to \$3,500 even with the 50 percent student discount.

"Depending on where he or she is employed, a professional technician can have \$70,000 worth of tools," Varella says. "The shops provide the big stuff like lifts and jacks, but each technician has his or her own hand tools."

At the end of the day, their goal is simple. "You go to school for two years, and when you graduate you are a good entry-level technician," Snider says. "You have that background and are now ready to go specialize. With experience you can become a master technician."

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QUICK FACTS

Skills

A successful automotive technician should have good analytical skills and a thorough knowledge of automobiles and how they work. Good computer skills are a necessity as modern automotive technology has moved from the mechanical to a computer-based model. Reading comprehension and communication skills are also important. The successful auto technician also must like change. Trident Technical College automotive instructor Clint Snider explains, "The Honda that you worked on 20 years ago does not even remotely resemble the one you are working on today."

Education and Training

Schooling

Both a one-year certificate program in Automotive Servicing and a two-year associate degree in Automotive Technology will prepare the graduate for entry-level jobs at a dealership, independent shop or national chain, according to Walter "Buzz" Varella, coordinator of the automotive technology program at TTC. The certificate program includes 11 basic automotive classes. Once a student has completed those, he or she can take advanced classes at night while working in the industry during the day. By the time the requirements for the associate degree have been completed, a student will also have picked up four more certificates: Automotive Engine Repair Specialist, Automatic Transmission Repair Specialist, Automotive Engine Performance Specialist and Automotive Brakes and Alignment Specialist.

Financial Aid

Grants, scholarships, loans and work/study programs are available for college students. S.C. lottery-funded tuition assistance, which can pay more than 50 percent of tuition costs, is available to TTC students. For most of this aid, high school students must submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is available online at www.fafsa.gov. For more information on federal financial aid programs or to apply online, visit the U.S. Department of Education website at www.ed.gov.

Opportunity

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of automotive service technicians and mechanics is projected to grow 9 percent during the current decade. Varella agrees that the job outlook is very good in this field. In fact, instructor Clint Snider says, "I'm 50 years old and in my entire career there's never been a job shortage." Varella notes that a seasoned veteran doesn't have to go looking for a job; someone is calling him or her.

Working Environment

Most automotive service technicians work in well-ventilated and well-lit repair shops. Although problems often can be identified and fixed with computers, technicians perform many tasks with greasy parts and tools, sometimes in uncomfortable positions. Although the workplace is not generally dangerous if safety procedures are followed, auto technicians do have a higher rate of injuries than the national average. They frequently must lift heavy parts and tools, and, as a result, minor workplace injuries, such as small cuts, sprains and bruises, are common.

Q&A



Walter "Buzz" Varella - Automotive Technology Program Director

Clint Snider - Automotive Technology Instructor

Q. What is an automotive technician?

A. An automotive technician is a professional who enjoys mental and physical challenges. He or she must possess an aptitude for electrical and electronics as well as mechanical systems, and he or she will provide routine maintenance to keep these systems operable and use troubleshooting skills when any of the automotive systems malfunction.

Q. Where do most automotive technicians work?

A. Automotive technicians have numerous opportunities for employment. New car dealerships are very popular for technicians, due to the opportunity to receive brand-specific training and the ability to focus on one brand. Others who enjoy variety can choose to work for independent shops, national franchises, corporate and private fleets, government institutions, equipment manufacturers, or any business that owns enough equipment that requires a technician.

Q. How do you get started in a career as an automotive technician?

A. The need is so great for technicians that many can become employed simply by answering an employment ad. However, for someone to become a high-wage-earning professional, it is best to attend vocational training at the high school level, and continue through a two-year associate degree program. It's also a good idea for these individuals to try to work in automotive-related fields through school. It's like learning a second language—you should immerse yourself to learn the most.

Q. What characteristics and skills does a successful automotive technician need?

A. Successful technicians must be self-motivated individuals, capable of working alone to solve complicated problems. Patience is required to learn interwoven electronics-controlled systems, be able to diagnose problems with these systems, and properly educate coworkers, sales associates and customers.

Q. What are some of the benefits of working in this field?

A. Job security is a great benefit for technicians. They are in high demand, and the pay is generally above average with the right education and experience.

Q. What is the employment outlook for an automotive technician?

A. The employment outlook for technicians is great. Locally, dealerships are expanding, cars are lasting longer and new models are introduced yearly.

Q. What advice would you give to someone considering a career in this field?

A. My best advice to a prospective technician is to educate yourself and learn as much as you can about the industry. Develop a love for reading technical material, and be patient. Skills are developed over years of dedication and training.

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Want more info?

ONLINE:

Automotive Service Association, www.asashop.org

National Automotive Technicians Education Foundation, www.natef.org

National Automotive Dealers Association, www.nada.org

National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence, www.ase.com

Jobs in this field:

Occupation	Wages by Area*
Automotive Body and Related Repairers	U.S. \$23,600-\$67,000+ S.C. \$21,000-\$70,000+ CH \$22,200-\$90,500+
Automotive Glass Installers and Repairers	U.S. \$19,900-\$47,100+ S.C. \$18,600-\$48,400+ CH \$18,600-\$48,400+
Automotive Master Mechanics	U.S. \$20,900-\$61,200+ S.C. \$19,200-\$56,500+ CH \$23,500-\$60,700+
Automotive Specialty Technicians	U.S. \$20,900-\$61,200+ S.C. \$19,200-\$56,500+ CH \$23,500-\$60,700+

*Source/Note: Wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics & SC Department of Employment and Workforce. Wage levels vary by skill level, tenure, and geographical areas. For more occupational information, contact Gary Crossley of LovetoWork.org, LLC at lovetoworkorg@yahoo.com or 843/452-4121.