

## Solving the fleet technician shortage

By D. Michael Pennington

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Technicians are critical to fleets and to dealership service operation. For dealerships, they are an essential piece of the fleet customer support puzzle, according to Duane Kyrish, general manager, Kyrish Truck Centers (International), Austin, Texas. "Technicians are incredibly hard to source. We've tried trade schools and vo-tech institutions, but we never give up and must give them (technicians) the training they need to support our customers," he added.

Carl Kirk, executive director of The Technology and Maintenance Council (TMC), acknowledges, "A lot has been said about the shortage of qualified drivers facing the trucking industry. But very little has been said about the impending and equally threatening shortage of truck mechanics."

A new, in-depth study titled "Disappearing Workforce: Strategies for Avoiding a Future of Limited Resources" was presented at the recent ConExpo event by authors Preston Ingalls, president and CEO, TBR Strategies LLC, and Eric Gearhart, director, SkillsUSA. It suggests distinct ways to attract people:

- Show the relationship of the use of technology by today's mechanic.
- Try attracting women, who now make up 48% of the workforce and make an excellent recruitment source.
- Develop high-quality recruitment campaigns in high schools showing the projected shortage and wage ranges of the positions.
- Offer training and education to attract Hispanics—the fastest growing segment of the population.
- Establish apprenticeship programs, which provide a structured grow-your-own method to acquire talent.
- Resist the tendency to cut school vocational programs.
- Increase the use of operator-performed maintenance programs.
- Develop joint task forces to address the issue and appeal to governmental awareness.

"We must make the technician shortage issue a priority," said Ingalls. He suggested that to keep technicians happy and retained at fleet operations, fleet owners/managers should look at their hiring practices (after all, the most important decision about the right fit is before you hire): make sure they're paying in the top 10% to 20%; examine technicians' benefits (are they competitive and fair?); and consider sharing that value with the current technician workforce.

He added that technicians deserve to be clear on the vision of the company and to understand their roles, responsibilities and contribution to that vision.

One of the industry's most significant technician competitions is the TMC SuperTech annual National Technician Skills Competition. This premier skills competition (written and hands-on), held in conjunction with the TMC September meeting, was created six years ago and continues to gain higher credibility among commercial vehicle technicians. Contestants come from all segments of the industry and many are state, regional or corporate champions.

Noteworthy is the event's final day technician training fair (featuring numerous hands-on, job-related training classes). The event is open to any actively-employed commercial vehicle technician, but competitors must be TMC Technician Members. (Membership forms are available at [tmc.truckline.com](http://tmc.truckline.com) or by calling TMC offices at 703-838-1763.)

"While many in the industry feel that the worst of the mechanic shortage hasn't yet hit, they agree that the situation is rapidly worsening," offered TMC's Kirk.

"I still think the technician shortage is an issue, and now that the industry is picking up (trucking), it will not get better any time soon," suggested Rick Martin, manager of training, Meritor. "However, with the business upturn, we may see more emphasis on internal training for techs and drivers in fleets and dealers as more revenue comes in from improved business."

"We have an issue and if we don't do something today, we will limit our country's ability to grow and compete in an international marketplace," emphasized Ingalls.

*Editor's note: Next month's column will offer insightful observations from the nation's leading vocational instructors, as well as leading fleet managers, on how our industry should tackle the technician shortage.*

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