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Guest Editorial

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What NACE Told Us About the Influence of Women in the Industry

Posted 1/8/2008

By Marcy Tieger

NACE reflects the changes going on in the industry for women.

I don't know if it's fair to say that the International Autobody Congress and Exposition (NACE) is a microcosm of the collision industry. I say this because many people were missing. They did not attend for any number of reasons - ranging from nobody to cover them while they were away to other personal reasons, such as financial pressures in their business. Without a doubt, it's a tough time. Nevertheless, NACE continues to be the world's largest gathering of collision industry professionals, and with approximately 25,000 to 27,000 in attendance, while it may not be a microcosm, it seems safe to say that it is at least a good barometer of the influence of women in the industry.

In 2005 and 2006, Geralynn Kottschade, AAM, was the chairwoman of NACE. This year, Darrell Amberson, AAM, led the charge, but Kottschade was still present as the chair of the Women's Industry Network (WIN).

Kottschade, former chairman of the Automotive Service Association, had the pleasure of awarding WIN's first scholarship to Selena Strickland, the top female finisher at the Skills USA Competition. This award was given during a general session ceremony where the I-CAR Education Foundation - in conjunction with Akzo Nobel Coatings - also gave scholarships to eight young women from technical schools and colleges around the country.

Earlier in the week, the National Auto Body Council (NABC) gave out its "Pride" awards. Two of the five recipients were women.

Last year, for the first time, the Automotive Management Institute (AMI) developed a "Women's Track" of classes endorsed by WIN at NACE with such topics as "Tools for Understanding Men and Women in the Automotive Workplace" and "A Brand-New You: Assertiveness Skills that Lead to Success."

If you walked the expo floor, you probably noticed that WIN had a booth staffed by members who gave out "SHE Knows Collision Repair" buttons, honoring the women of the collision industry. It was affirming to see so many women wearing the buttons and also reassuring to see almost as many men wearing them.

Also satisfying for the WIN volunteers was no less than five vocational and technical school teachers who stopped by the booth and bragged about their female students - some of the best and brightest in their classes. Sadly, these supportive male teachers also know that many of these young women will have a tough time finding a job despite their credentials and the overwhelming need for technicians.

Note to shop owners: Give her a chance.
Opportunity breeds loyalty, and loyalty breeds retention.

Fewer product demonstrations, posters and ads at NACE relied on cleavage, and there was more focus on the skill and competence of women. One technical school had a booth with a backdrop of vignettes of people using the skills the school taught. Five out of six pictures showed women working beside men. Although some still believe that "sex sells," I think more are beginning to agree with Timothy Leary that "intelligence is the ultimate aphrodisiac."



While there were certainly many out-in-the-open signs of a changing industry, there were also quiet ones. Take the northern California shop owner who arrived at NACE on Monday, flew home on Halloween (Wednesday) to trick-or-treat with his kids, and was back in Las Vegas later that evening to share a beer with his team and peers. Or the insurance executive from the East Coast who finished his work on Friday at 5:30 p.m. and rushed to catch a plane so he could be home Saturday morning when his kids woke up.

For those of you who are wondering what kind of consultant has the audacity to talk about work-life balance while everyone else is talking about cycle time and lean, let's be clear: Lean is about increased productivity and efficiency in the time allotted.

When the lean gurus talk about a second shift or even a 24-hour production cycle, they do not presume that people who are already working 12- to 15-hour days will work more hours. In fact, they hope you'll be freed up and actually capture time derived from greater efficiency. They also hope that if you commit to a lean model, you'll get rid of dead weight and hire and compensate skilled and trustworthy staff who don't need you to micromanage and essentially, duplicate effort. Lean relies on processes ... not just people.

It is also important to note that work-life balance is the mantra of the Gen Y work force. Today's younger workers want flexibility, and they want their jobs to accommodate their family and personal lives. So don't be surprised, when you add that second shift, if the technician who worked from 8 to 5 jumps at the chance to work 10 to 7 so he can stagger his schedule with his wife's, eat breakfast with his kids and minimize their time in daycare.

Work-life balance is no longer the domain of women. It is a concept that applies just as readily to men and thankfully, more of them are starting to talk about it. Moreover, the "life" part of the term "work-life balance" is not only reserved for the worker who is a spouse or a parent. Balance derives from all the people and things in life that give you joy, keep you centered and motivate you to get up Monday morning to start another week. The more we embrace this concept, the better it is for all of us and our businesses.



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