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The Case for Recruiting Women

What are the business benefits for doing more to attract women to careers as technicians - and how can you draw on this largely untapped pool of talent?

Valerie Decatur is a relative newcomer to the Collision Repair Industry. A graduate of Stanford University, Decatur spent a number of years working in human resources within the hotel industry, but about a year ago became director of human resources for Cooks Collision, a 16-shop chain in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Last month, Decatur attended the Women's Industry Network conference in Phoenix, a two-day event for women in the collision industry. One of her primary goals: To talk about – and hopefully learn more about – attracting women to careers as collision technicians.

After all, Decatur said during a panel discussion at the event in which she participated, Cooks has three female parts administrators, six female estimators and a shop manager who is a woman. But of Cooks' 125 painters, body techs and helpers, not one is a woman.

"That's an area we're really hoping to change," Decatur said.

Other panelists and speakers outlined why they see it as just good business sense for the industry to do more to attract woman as employees, and shared their ideas for doing so.

The business case

The shortage of technicians and the aging of the collision repair workforce – of which currently less than one percent is female – has been widely documented and discussed. (If you need the numbers, check the I-CAR Education Foundation's 'Snapshot of the Industry,' www.ed-foundation.org.)

Given that situation, Marcy Tieger said, ignoring half the population as potential entrants into the industry makes little business sense.

Tieger is a principal in the consulting firm Symphony Advisors, which is led by former Caliber Collision CEO Matthew Ohrnstein. She believes that just as World War II led to "Rosie the Riveter" and an acceptance of women in non-traditional trades because of necessity, a similar need will drive this industry to be more welcoming to women.

Tieger argued the business case for attracting more women to the

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trade in a bit of a back-door fashion. Certain factors tend to serve as barriers or impediments to women entering this trade, she said. But the changes needed to reduce those barriers also happen to be steps that will improve your business, she believes.

Making your shop's work environment cleaner and safer will make it more appealing to women, for example, Tieger argued. But that is also the first step in making any business more "lean" – boosting productivity by giving technicians a well-organized, well-lit work area where they have quick access to the tools, materials, and equipment they need.

"A clean shop will appeal to everyone: male and female employees, customers and insurers," Tieger said.

Attracting more women into the industry will also require instituting credible sexual harassment policies, and educating and training male employees and managers about what that means, Tieger noted.

Again, she considers this a smart business move whether or not your shop hires any women. She cited the example of a shop manager who makes inappropriate comments to a female insurance company representative at the shop who eventually complains to her company.

"That insurer can call you up and tell you what (your manager) is doing, but that's really uncomfortable," Tieger said. "So they may not say anything, but suddenly there's less work coming your way. So there's a potential loss of business if you don't have a credible zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy and employees who understand it."

Among the other business benefits of attracting more women into the industry, Tieger argued, are that most women in non-traditional roles are eager to prove themselves and will often be among a company's hardest workers. And for an industry as focused on CSI as this one is, Tieger said, not enough shops have recognized that, "CSI is synonymous with TLC," the empathy, patience, and kindness at which women often excel.

The next step

So given Tieger's arguments, what are some concrete ways that shop owners and others in the business – men and women – can help draw in more employees from that half of the workforce?

Laura Angell, a collision repair instructor at Warren Technical College in Lakewood, Colorado, urges women in the industry to speak at school career days, and to serve as mentors for any female collision repair students in their area. "Even if you don't have or haven't had a teenager of your own, you've been one, so you know it's just not an easy time," Angell said. "They need some support, someone to talk to, someone to share with when they do something great in the program, someone to help them when they are struggling. It would be nice for them to know another female in the industry to learn how you've done what you've accomplished."

Capturing girls' interest in cars and the industry early is key, Angell and others said. By middle school, many girls' interest in math, science, and technology begins to wane. Angell said her school "recruits" among elementary school students, bringing them in, for example, to try spraying a car (using safe, latex paint).

Rochelle Thielen, a business development manager for Mitchell International, said she is a mentor for a 12-year-old-girl through the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program in Van Nuys, California. "One of the things I noticed is that until she met me, her idea of where she could go in life was very, very limited," Thielen said. "Looking around at what her parents did, the kind of jobs that were in her area, she didn't have anything to aspire to. I think exposing some of the options to kids like that gives them a whole new perspective on what they can do with their lives. This is an industry that has a lot of career advancement in it."

Gigi Walker has two female painters and a female apprentice tech on the staff of her business, Walker's Autobody, in Concord, California. She said one way shops can encourage more young women to continue their training and enter the industry is to offer them an opportunity to work at your shop while in school.

A number of speakers at the WIN conference emphasized the importance of every business in the industry having a woman as part of the "face" of the business, from its advertising and marketing materials to who speaks at school career days. Allowing young girls to see women succeeding in the industry – whether as technicians, estimators, sales reps, adjusters or business owners – will help them see it is an option open to them as well.

Lillian Maimone, CEO of Marco's Auto Body, which has five production shops and three customer drop-off sites in the Los Angeles area, said that while offering more flexibility with work schedules is important to help attract more women, it is just as effective at attracting male employees. Maimone said her company, for example, now has one employee whose job is to fill in for estimators and shop managers while they are on vacation, so they do not have to worry about coming back to a desk overflowing with work that piled up while they were away.

The younger generations, Tieger agreed, take "work-life balance issues" very seriously, and companies that help employees obtain the balance they want will be the most successful at attracting and retaining good employees. Angell agreed. Her follow-up surveys with students five years after they graduated shows that employees – men and women – cite a lack of flexibility in hours as among the key reasons they left the industry.

Tieger said she knows a women shop owner who assists Girl Scouts in her area earn their automotive badge. "She teaches them how to check tire pressure, how to check the oil, and read the owner's manual," Tieger said. It is basic stuff but it can spark a girl's interest in cars and the industry, she said.

Similarly, Tieger commented, talking with students about what to

look for when buying a used car can be a good path to introducing them to the trade. Help them understand that it is not as much an issue whether a car has been wrecked before, but whether it has been repaired properly. Show them how to spot good work versus bad, she suggested.

Jeannie Silver of CARSTAR Mundelein in Illinois uses a similar round-about way to speak to student groups. When schools were not interested in a speaker from the collision repair industry, Silver asked to speak as a woman business owner, particularly one in a non-traditional business. It is a topic welcomed at school career days, yet still a way to discuss technical careers in the industry too.

Production teams are another way to include female technicians even if they have not reached the level of proficiency to work on their own yet. Again, Tieger pointed out, this is a shift that many progressive shops are making as a good business decision anyway, yet it also serves to potentially open the door to more female technicians.

Tieger and all of the women quoted in this article acknowledged that recruiting more women into your business and the industry will not necessarily be easy. But, they said, there are good business reasons for doing so, particularly for those who recognize that the technician shortage necessitates change.

“If you don’t like the way the world is, you change it,” Tieger said, quoting Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children’s Defense Fund. “You have an obligation to change it. You just do it one step at a time.” o

Feedback

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