An extremely severe shortage for diesel technicians has been predicted by industry experts as baby-boomers, estimated to be between 40 to 50 percent of current diesel technicians, are slated to retire between now and 2030. According to Phil Byrd, Chairman of the American Trucking Association, trucking will need as many as 200,000 technicians over the next ten years just to keep up with current truck maintenance demands.

Diesel technician training can be in the form of a six-to-twelve month certificate program or a one- or two-year associate's degree, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. “We are only graduating about 3,500 diesel technicians in this country a year,” according to Tony Molla, Vice President of communications for the National Institute of Automotive Excellence in Leesburg, VA.

The diesel technician shortage is a source now of increased downtime, inefficiency, dissatisfaction among drivers and customer service problems – and it is only going to get worse in the future. According to Dwight McAlexander, a retired engineer for Volvo, “If the current trends continue, we are fast approaching a day when American consumers could see food shortages in the supermarkets because trucks aren’t able to get produce to market.” While McAlexander’s scenario may sound extreme, he describes the situation as “desperate” and “one that has been getting worse for several years now. The trucking industry simply can’t get enough new technicians to replace those that are retiring.” McAlexander continues, “That’s not factoring in the fact that trucking is just not seen as an attractive career opportunity. This is a problem that is about to get exponentially worse.”

CAREER PERCEPTIONS

Diesel technicians pay will vary by region, but a new graduate from a diesel technician program at a technical college can earn over $40,000 annually. For students who learn quickly and work to earn more accreditations, pay will rise rapidly. With experience and on-going education, it is not uncommon for top diesel mechanics to make over $100,000 per year.

With a young person able to earn over $40,000 a year only one to two years out of high school, then why is there such a shortage of diesel technicians? Why aren’t these jobs being filled by the younger generation?

It all comes down the perception of diesel technicians in the minds of young people considering career options. The image of a diesel technician that “gets dirty” often times does not appeal to the younger generation who might have entered the field in the past. Becoming a diesel technician does not have the social status that it did fifty to sixty years ago.

The traditional image of a diesel technician is mired firmly from those in the 1940s and 1950s, McAlexander says. “What’s worse, trucking is at a disadvantage when it comes to pulling from the pool of students who do want to work with their hands today,” he says. “We have to fight and compete for the same student who wants to work on computers or in aviation, automotive, marine, motorcycles or construction equipment, and frankly, trucking is the least attractive industry of that bunch.”

TRAINING ON OBSOLETE EQUIPMENT

A diesel technician student today is usually trained on engines and
components that are fifteen to twenty years old because modern diesel engines are so expensive that schools cannot afford them. Guy Warpness, president of WyoTech Laramie, says, “Even a basic diesel engine to use as a current teaching aid costs me $30,000 to $50,000 apiece. Thirty years ago, they cost me $2,000.” (8)

McAlexander adds, “Technical schools today simply cannot afford to upgrade their teaching aids when a diesel exhaust system costs $5,000 and a heavy duty gas engine costs $95,000, and they are turning out 20 new techs a year.” (9)

Another complicating factor for students studying to become diesel technicians is the trend for the OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) to produce proprietary diagnostic systems. The OEMs are hesitant to share their proprietary technology with technical schools and vocational colleges. “It would cost millions of dollars today to get a trade school up to speed to teach one captive OEM technology. Even then, the student would only know a portion of what they need to be successful in a modern shop. All this is going on at a time when a base Volvo truck today has between 18 and 21 computer processors on it,” says McAlexander. (10)

McAlexander says that most of today’s technical students who graduate with diesel certification are extremely unprepared to start their careers. “They are armed a little better than if they know nothing – but not a lot. Some of them don’t even know how to hook up a diagnostic tool to read the codes off a truck’s ECM (electronic control module), and they’re not going to learn that until their employer decides they’re worthy of being sent to an OEM school to learn today’s technology.” (11)

INCREASED DOWNTIME

While tractor engines are getting more technologically advanced, diesel technician training for each OEM often has not even come close to keeping pace on the various new technologies. The end result for most late model trucks that come into the shop and need repair is increased downtime.

Mike McFarlin from M&W Transportation, says, “Downtime is horrendous. It is particularly bad when trying to get service from a dealer that is different from the one you bought the truck from.” McFarlin says this is an industry-wide problem saying that the ability, training and staffing of technicians at many dealers needs to be considered in view of the technical problems caused by ever more complex equipment. (12)

There are over 38,000 fault codes on a typical truck today and Greg Reimmuth, Noregon’s senior VP of sales and marketing, says, “One common example is when a reported problem with engine or transmission performance actually gets identified as an issue with a related body or chassis controller. Remember: we’ve got multiple computers on today’s trucks, not only commuting information to the driver but exchanging data between one another. In many cases, it’s going to require a ‘total vehicle scan’ to identify the root causes of problems.” (13)

Chad Christensen, strategic consulting manager at GE Capital Service says, “The ongoing technician shortage is also putting upward pressure on labor rates. Staffing shortages create a backlog of work in many facilities throughout the country. The technician shortage is especially acute in the oil patch and rural areas.” (14)

RECOMMENDATIONS

For those companies that operate private fleets and have their maintenance in-house, the first efforts to counter the shortage of diesel technicians should be to retain the mechanics they currently have. Proactive measures can be implemented to uncover and address any issues the technicians have before they quit. This could be accomplished by forming a committee that meets regularly comprised of technicians, management and a representative of the HR department. This committee would identify problems that are leading to diesel technician turnover and come up with suggestions to rectify the problems before the technicians quit.

A financial bonus system could be put in place for any diesel technician that recruits a new technician to join the company. Besides the financial reward, the company diesel technician would be more likely to bring someone to the company that would work well with
the existing group of company technicians.

If there is a local community college or tech school nearby, make the effort to build strong ties with their diesel technician program. Donations of used equipment or tools, tours of your maintenance facility to prospective students and speaking to diesel technician classes are just a few ways to strengthen the relationship with your local community college or tech school.

Create internships or co-op programs so the students can get some on the job training with your company’s technicians. Your technicians will have the chance to interact with the students and build relationships which may lead to the student selecting your company to work for upon graduation.

The goal of all the efforts with the local community college or tech school is to make your company the employer of choice in the minds of the diesel technician student before they graduate and are recruited by other companies.

To do nothing about the diesel technician shortage is ignoring a problem that will increase maintenance costs and downtime as well as lower the efficiency of your entire logistics system. The time to address the diesel technician shortage is right now.

ABOUT LANDAIR

Founded in 1981, Landair is a privately owned, truckload carrier and non-asset based logistics company that provides customized logistics solutions to its diverse customer base. Landair's services include dedicated contract carriage, warehouse management, freight management, transportation management and truckload service.

END NOTES

(1) Barbara Trainin Blank. “Mechanic Shortages Looming.” CityTownInfo.com
(3) Barbara Trainin Blank. “Mechanic Shortages Looming.” CityTownInfo.com