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BEST PRACTICES FOR RECRUITING AND RETAINING TECHNICIANS

There is no single magic answer of how to find them

For every 10 technicians retiring, only two are coming into the industry, according to John Paulik, senior vice president and general manager of Tri State Truck Center, a Freightliner and Western Star dealership in Shrewsbury, Mass.

“We are also looking at approximately 50% of our current diesel technicians nationwide retiring within the next 15 years.” Making things worse, the need for bus and truck technicians and diesel engine specialists is expected to grow 9% from 2012 to 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For many fleets the diesel technician shortage is already a reality and these statistics are cause for even more concern. Here are nine things that will help you in your technician recruiting and retention efforts.

1. REASSESS YOUR PROCESS: “The first step in fixing the problem is really understanding and reassessing your process from end to end,” says Patrick Pendergast, director of talent acquisition at Ryder System. “It’s not just about going out and trying to recruit technicians. You have to look at the job you have, the management structure you have, the training you have in place, and your rewards, compensation and benefits. You need to look at all those pieces and see how you look in the market.”

He adds, “Doing this assessment gives you the opportunity to look in the mirror and ask, “Am I truly competitive today in this market?” Then you make tweaks because it really needs to be an integrated process.”

2. GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL TECH COLLEGES: Local technical schools are great places to find technicians, but your efforts should go beyond attending career fairs. Jane Clark, vice president of member services for NationalLease, recommends becoming part of the school’s advisory board. This gives you input into curriculum and access to students.

Both NationalLease and Tri State Truck Center sponsor classrooms at Universal Technical Institute facilities. Sponsoring a classroom allows a company to brand the room with its logo, photos and other information. "I think it is important that students see an actual organization involved with education," Paulik says. "It lends credence to the school and it allows the students to see that organizations actually care about their education, and are willing to help them and employ them once they have finished school."

3. GO BACK TO SCHOOL: Vocational programs give you access to students who've already expressed interest in being diesel technicians, but getting students interested in the trucking industry has to start sooner. Tri State Truck Center is working with Worcester South High School to develop a diesel program. Paulik says the dealership plans to reach out to other high schools in the area as well. But the dealership's efforts won't stop there. "Ultimately we hope to reach out to middle schools in our area," he says.

NationalLease's Clark says it's also important to speak with parents about the opportunities in the trucking industry. "They have a better grasp on what we are talking about with job market numbers and salary expectations and what that means for their children's future."

4. GET SOCIAL: If you want to reach younger people, you need to be where they are. "The thought that (technician candidates) don't have computers is flawed," says Ryder's Pendergast. "To get to where people are—especially millennials—social media is important."

However, he advises fleets to keep their social media strategy simple. "If Facebook is all you can handle in order to be both engaging and interactive with prospective employees, do that." Relevant content is more important than being involved in every social media network, he believes.

5. LOOK TO THE MILITARY: Since "we are not making (technicians) in enough numbers to keep up with attrition, we have to expand our outreach," says Tony Molla, vice president of communications for the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence. "The most obvious place is to hire from the military. Military technicians generally work on diesel units. Most of the military equipment, once you get past the armor, is Cummins. It might be a little ruggedized for the military, but frankly the internal workings are virtually identical."

He suggests looking for veterans with a "91 Bravo" Military Occupational Specialty, the designation for wheeled vehicle technicians.

ASE is involved in a pilot program to get veterans in that MOS category ASE-certified prior to leaving military service. "That way when they come out they will have an actual credential. In this case it happens to be diesel engine."

In addition, all states have Workforce Development programs that work with veterans and often hold job fairs specifically to help them find jobs.

6. GROW YOUR OWN: Molla says fleets should consider "going back to the future, where you would find an intelligent, eager young person and grow your own." Given the complexity of today's trucks, it probably isn't possible to start with someone who has no experience, but "you can get someone coming out of a training program and develop a

career track for them. You will have to invest in them and send them to training,” so they can develop the skills you need.

7. LOOK BEYOND SALARY: Certainly you have to pay your technician a competitive wage, but there are other parts of a compensation package to consider. Remember benefits are about more than health insurance, says Ryder’s Pendergast. Smaller benefits such as tool allowances, tuition reimbursement and discount programs can tip the scale in your favor.

Jim Rogers, who was the corporate fleet maintenance manager for McKee Foods for 14 years before retiring, says, “Many would say money is the number one motivator. I haven’t found that to be true. Money may get them in the door, but how they are treated and the work conditions will hold them.”

Rogers says he was involved with a study that showed the relationship an employee has with his or her first-level supervisor was the real key to retention.

Clark agreed, adding, “It’s about being able to build a culture of trust and a culture of development within your organization.”

Little things can mean a lot. “The occasional pizza for lunch, breakfast biscuit or company-supplied Gatorade in hot weather go a long way, as do holiday dinners,” Rogers adds. “Some obvious issues such as management of the uniform program, keeping a supply of shop towels, having specialty tools available and having cleanliness standards for the shop, break room and locker room, all are positives.”

A key with these additional benefits is to make sure technician candidates know about them. “Communicate clearly with your new hires and existing employees about all the stuff the company gives them,” Molla says. Build your own story of “this is a great place to work. This is where you want to come. One of the ancillary benefits is that they will talk to their friends so you will attract people through word of mouth.”

It is also important for new technicians to understand their career path, “Millennials want to be able to understand how they will progress within a company,” Pendergast says, “Being a technician is a great gateway to learning our industry.” Communicate growth opportunities and point out examples of technicians who have moved into management positions within your company.

8. GET CREATIVE: While money is not the only answer, it can help entice technicians to your operation. Jason Goby, service product owner at Karmak, suggests signing bonuses for your new tech. It’s not unusual for drivers to get signing bonuses, so why not offer them to your technician candidates?

While a lot of recruiting efforts are focused on new technicians, don’t neglect more seasoned techs who may be looking for a new opportunity. Goby says that although flat rate pay systems are not used much today, they can be attractive to veteran technicians. “When they start seeing their paychecks from being on flat tire, they will never want to go back to hourly in a million years,” he says.

Flexible schedules can also entice people to your operation. “This is very appealing to millennials,” Molla says. “These are folks who work to live, not live to work. The more flexibility you can offer them, the more attractive your operation is going to be.”

Paid training is another way to attract and keep technicians. “Pay for training, and people will be more inclined to work for you,” Goby says. This is especially true of people who don’t have confidence in their skills and worry that they won’t know how to fix trucks that come into your shops.

9. BE CREATIVE YET CONSISTENT: One thing is certain: There is no single right avenue to recruit technicians.

“You have to do a lot of different things all the time and be very consistent with it,” says Clark. “It is really about putting together a recruiting program, and that might be posting jobs on line, it might be a referral program, it might be an apprenticeship program.”

She says it’s important to build brand recognition, and that means consistently putting your name out. “There is not just one place where you can find people, so you really have to have a consistent recruiting program in place and then stick with it over time.”

Goby endorses using different avenues to reach technician candidates. “If you constantly are looking in the same spots, you are going to constantly get the same thing.”

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