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# Employer and Training Needs: Report 3 Automotive Mechanics

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Report Number Three



AUTOMOTIVE MECHANICS

# EMPLOYER AND TRAINING NEEDS

PREPARED FOR METROPOLITAN TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Center for Applied Urban Research

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nebraska   
at omaha 

AUTOMOTIVE MECHANICS

by

Michael T. Eskey

## AUTOMOTIVE MECHANICS

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this portion of the study is to determine the employment and training needs in Metropolitan Omaha for the occupational area designated as automotive mechanics. The automotive trade was divided into four major areas: 1) general automotive mechanics, including brakes and engine rebuilding, 2) service station mechanics, 3) new/used car preparation, and 4) auto machinists.

### Programs

The 1979-80 catalog of the Metropolitan Technical Community College lists these specific programs in the automotive mechanics area: 1) Engine Rebuilding Specialist (9 months), 2) Fleet Maintenance and Management (9 months), 3) New and Used Vehicle Preparation (9 months), 4) Service Station Mechanic and Operator (9 months), 5) Tune-up and Air Conditioning Specialist (9 months).

### Data Source and Methodology

The target population included a sampling of employers in each of the four major areas. Interviews were conducted with employers directly related to the specific areas of interest and other areas when applicable. Omaha has several auto shops specializing in certain areas only, others do general mechanical work, and still others specialize in each of the four major areas.

Two survey instruments were constructed to gather data about the employment and training needs of the employers in each of the four areas in metropolitan Omaha. Both personal and telephone interviews were conducted. The findings of this portion of the study are summarized below with conclusions about the employer and training needs as related to present or proposed training at Metropolitan Community College.

### Findings of the Study

#### General Automotive Mechanics

This section of the research included personal and telephone interviews with shop managers of the major franchise car dealers, private garage owners,

service station owners, and department/chain store automotive shop managers. The training requirements, needs of these groups, and the pay scale of the mechanics all varied considerably.

The majority of service shops run in conjunction with car dealerships employed what is referred to as heavy-line mechanics, specialty mechanics, and new/used car preparation personnel. The heavy-line mechanics are used for major engine work; i.e., valve jobs, piston changing, and other major jobs up to complete engine overhauls. The specialty mechanics are involved with transmission, front-end, power steering, and tune-up work. The new and used car dealerships also employ individuals in new and used car preparation. Persons are also employed to perform "quick service" work to include minor brake jobs, grease jobs, and oil jobs.

The service managers contacted stated that the current economic situation has affected the amount of service work being brought in by customers. The high interest rates have brought about slowdowns in the number of new cars being purchased, and, subsequently, fewer warranty repairs are being performed. No major layoffs have resulted from the slowdown; however, some service managers said they would not be filling positions as present employees left. Some are currently working with one or two fewer mechanics than a year ago.

Even with the uncertainty of the current automobile market, most service managers were optimistic about the future. Most felt that the downswing is temporary, and the need for trained mechanics will increase in the near future.

Certain other factors were blamed for slowdowns in the repair business by franchise mechanics. Many individuals are currently performing their own work on minor repairs such as tune-ups and oil changes. Further, many individuals are not bringing in their automobiles for major work such as brakes, transmission, and front-end repair, and some are totally ignoring needed major engine repairs.

The franchise shop managers were in general agreement that a great demand currently exists for trained automobile mechanics. They said that when they do have job openings too few qualified persons apply. Individuals must possess technical and mechanical competence which is acquired by direct experience, training received at technical community colleges, and training provided by company-affiliated schools.

Several skills were listed as necessary prerequisites for occupying positions as general, heavy-line mechanics, and specialty mechanics. Basic experience was cited most often as lacking in job applicants, but general knowledge in all areas (brakes, front-end, transmissions, air-conditioning, tune-ups, and engine overhauls) was necessary, too.

The franchise service managers were highly in favor of education and training at a technical community college. A one-to-two year program was considered necessary to prepare the individual for most areas in the automotive field. This training would need to be supplemented with experience and company-sponsored training sessions.

Courses in electronics and emission control were cited most often as being needed to prepare individuals for jobs in the automotive field. Other areas were specific courses in tune-ups with an emphasis on electronic ignitions, transmissions with an emphasis on front-wheel drive, small engine repair, factory air-conditioning, diagnostics, and introductory courses in diesel engines. An emphasis was also placed on the importance of understanding all of the other specialty areas of the automobile.

The fact that a shortage of trained mechanics exists is evident in the pay scales of mechanics in the franchise dealers' shops. Heavy-line mechanics are in demand and are paid accordingly. Salaries are generally flat job rate or commission. Some shops reported that their mechanics were producing at a level of 150-175 percent and that their mechanics were making from \$15,000 to \$25,000 annually.

#### Service Station Mechanics

Service station and chain store automotive department managers presented a somewhat different view than did franchise shop managers. The more extensive motor work, transmission work, and air-conditioning work is generally not offered to customers and so is not a required skill for mechanics. The skills that are required included training or experience in tune-ups, brakework, lubrication and oil changes, muffler and exhaust systems, and wheel and front-end alignment. In most of the shops and stations contacted, specialists were utilized in the above areas much the same as in the franchise automotive shops.

The service managers contacted agreed that a shortage of trained mechanics exists. When they did have job openings, although there were generally several applicants, there were usually too few in the needed areas.

Experience was cited as the biggest deficiency, but school training was also noted as lacking.

The chain-store automotive departments (e.g., J. C. Penney's, Sears, etc.) provide individuals with the opportunity to gain further knowledge in their areas and keep up with current changes by sending them to a series of one-week training schools. Some of the larger service centers provided similar training, and both groups utilized the General Motors Training Center in Omaha. The smaller service stations generally could not take advantage of such schools due to the small number of mechanics employed and the effect on their businesses of losing one for a week at a time.

The emphasis on a combination of training at a technical school and general experience was noted by service managers in this area. The length of the training, however, was not as long as that cited by franchise service managers. Six months to one year was generally regarded as sufficient for training an individual for this type of mechanical work.

An emphasis was placed on courses in electronics to prepare the individuals for changes in the field. Other specific courses mentioned were small engine repair, tune-ups, brake systems, front-end work, diagnosis, and trouble shooting.

The salaries of the chain-store and service station mechanics were considerably less than that of franchise auto mechanics. The starting salaries ranged from \$4.00 to \$6.50 per hour. This wage, however, was a straight hourly rate and not the flat rate or commission wage received by most franchise mechanics. Skilled individuals in chain-store shops and service stations could use this area as a stepping stone to either service manager positions or positions with franchise dealer shops.

#### New and Used Car Preparation

The new and used car shop managers stated that individuals in this job classification generally were inexperienced and learned on the job so no need exists for courses of instruction. A specific list of items must be checked on each vehicle before it is either placed on the lot or delivered to the owner. This list is standard for all new cars and very similar for used cars. The repetition involved provides the individual with the training needed. Individuals in this area occasionally work up to more skilled positions in the shop; however, this happens very seldom. The pay scale is generally minimum wage or slightly higher.

## Auto Machinists

The high cost of parts and labor have added together to present a rather dismal future for individuals in the auto machinists area. Only about four or five shops in the Omaha area specifically work in this area. The trade involves total motor rebuilding, including boring, balancing, and milling engines. This area requires a knowledge of all aspects of engine components and a general knowledge of other components. The high cost involved in having an engine totally rebuilt has slowed this area of the automotive business considerably, and many car owners are more inclined to buy a new car or engine than to pay for having their old one rebuilt. Much of the business of these shop owners is concentrated on more specialized types of engines such as those for stock cars.

The shop owners contacted revealed that presently they do not have enough business in this area to merit specific courses. Further, the cost of equipment necessary for setting up an instructional facility for this area would be much too high to justify the current need. Most of the individuals contacted and their employees had received their training on the job, and, because of the many various types of engines worked on, experience was probably the single best preparation.

## Summary and Conclusions

A review of the automotive mechanics field in the Omaha area revealed that trained individuals are needed in this area. Further, school training is needed and encouraged. Service managers stated that one- to two-year programs are needed in electronics and emission controls, tune-ups, air-conditioning, brakes, small engine repair, diesel engines, and transmissions.

Currently, the major car manufacturers have installed a new electronic ignition system called the computer command catalytic control system. Training in this area has been limited to selected numbers of franchise mechanics, but the training will become available to Metro Tech instructors as soon as openings become available at the Omaha GM Training Center. Training in this area was noted as a necessary component to a course of instruction in the automotive mechanics field. The respondents agreed that Metro Tech should continue a program in automotive repairs and make every attempt to insure that the training remain current with the industry.