

Top level automotive technicians are as qualified in their field as medical specialists

Highly qualified automotive technicians are increasingly scarce in South Africa, as their training journey will encompass Internal Combustion Engines, Hybrid Technology, and Electric vehicles. With most cars having upwards of 30,000 parts and being more of a 'computer on wheels' than a people-moving machine, initial training now takes as long as that of a medical specialist, and they must continue training as new models and technologies are introduced.

Finding young people to become automotive technicians is not easy, primarily due to the stigma associated with technical trades in South Africa. Unlike in developed countries such as Germany and Switzerland, where artisans are highly regarded and respected, there is a negative perception surrounding such occupations. Additionally, local dealerships and repair shops often have specific requirements for new hires. They typically require candidates to possess a matriculation certificate with a pass mark of at least 50% in mathematics and science, or at least one of these subjects. Alternatively, candidates may be considered if they have completed a bridging program, even if their marks in these subjects fall below the specified threshold.

"In days long past, apprentices obtained most of their skills from an artisan who served as a mentor. Most of the training was practical," says Gary McCraw, the Director of the National Automobile Dealers' Association (NADA) at the Retail Motor Industry organisation (RMI). "However, things have drastically changed, and now there is a significant amount of theoretical learning that technicians must grasp, in addition to putting this knowledge into practice.

McCraw goes on to say that today's automotive technicians are highly specialised and far removed from the mechanic of the old days. These technicians are also highly sought-after, making their training and retention costs a significant investment for dealerships. This demand extends locally and overseas since the training and qualifications meet international standards.

A successful franchise dealer with over 50 years of experience in the local motor industry, who started as an apprentice technician himself in 1969, asserts that today's master or diagnostic technician "can be compared to a medical specialist" in terms of the duration and intensity of studying and on-the-job technical training required.

"It is imperative to recognise that the human body has remained largely unaltered throughout the passage of centuries. While new afflictions may emerge, the fundamental structure of the human body remains a constant for medical practitioners. This is certainly not the case for top-line automotive technicians who must work on cars that are 20-30 years old, with relatively basic technology, and then transition to the latest models with highly advanced technology, thousands of parts all perfectly engineered to work in unison, most of which is electronic," McCraw added.

"Besides dealing with old and new technology cars, there is a growing range of vehicles in most franchises that require attention in the service department. These range from small, low-tech runabouts to very expensive luxury models with complex technology, which can encounter various issues," said the experienced retailer, who also worked for some local OEMs before buying into a franchised dealership in 1981.

He subsequently acquired an additional franchise, thus gaining knowledge of the demands placed on the service department across multiple brands.

The standard apprenticeship in the motor industry has also changed significantly. In addition to working under an artisan, apprentices now spend as much as two weeks a month at a college for theoretical studies. Once the apprentice qualifies as an artisan, the real pressure begins in terms of skill improvement and theoretical learning. Much of this is specific to models and systems.

Learning never stops, and depending on the specific franchise, the five years after qualifying as an artisan can be demanding as the technician progresses towards becoming a master or diagnostic technician. Technicians are also required to undergo annual refresher courses and receive training prior to the introduction of a new model.

"The major challenge faced by dealerships is how to attract matriculants with maths and science as subjects to pursue careers as automotive technicians and remove the stigma attached to the technical trades, which have become more focused on lab-coats and laptops than overalls and 'lappies'. These individuals typically start as apprentices on relatively low remuneration but receive increases as they progress through various qualification levels and work towards achieving master or diagnostic status. Finding suitable candidates is further complicated by recent changes in labour laws," concludes McCraw.

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