

## Demand For Auto Mechanics Revs Up As Technological Changes Fuel Growth By Lisa Heyamoto

Customers at the Jim Adams Auto Clinic in Shoreline are informed upon entry by a sign that there's a \$500 charge for a clang-thud-clang sound.

For a ping-ping-ping? It's a steal at \$50. And though auto technicians at the shop, which opened in 1966, actually have a stethoscope to amplify even the subtlest of car noises, it turns out a basic screwdriver makes a much handier tool.

"You have to experience it, you have to be in it," said Ivo Lovric, a 10-year veteran of the job. "You have to work on it with your hands."

But these days, auto technicians have to use a whole lot more than their hands and ears to diagnose an ailing auto.

Cars have evolved tremendously over the past 20 years, and the under-the-hood careers have kept pace with the changing technology.

Nearly every engine is controlled by a computer that gauges the vehicle's status through a series of sensors, and it's no longer the case that a pound on the hood and a turn of the socket wrench will get your car road-ready.

"The old days of mostly mechanical repairs are really gone and now it's learning how to do electronic work," said Dave Cappert, an executive director at Virginia-based Automotive Service Excellence, a national certification organization.

"Every piece of the car has changed so dramatically that there's hardly a technology that's the way it was 20 years ago."

It's this reason that the 840,000 workers in the country go by the title "auto technician" rather than the more archaic "mechanic."

The work, along with the name, has changed and the need for skilled, smart workers is on the rise. In King County, the demand for auto technicians is expected to increase by 3 percent in the next year alone, according to the state Department of Employment Security.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts the field will grow by up to 20 percent by 2010.

Many technicians began their careers by tinkering with cars in their teens. But most anyone with some mechanical aptitude and an interest in fixing things can become an auto technician.

Those entering the field with a degree from an automotive-training program should have an easier time finding a job, the Labor Bureau predicts, but no formal education is needed for an entry-level position.

In Washington, there are 40 certified programs offered in high schools, community colleges or vocational schools.

Certification is not required for someone to work as an auto technician, but most go through the process. Lovric, who is certified, downplays its significance.

"It's not a big deal - it's just a tag on your sleeve that says you're certified," the 46-year-old said. "It's more about what you know and not what tags you have."

The three technicians at Jim Adams know plenty, and they split the tasks along lines of expertise - Lovric specializes in brakes.

This division of labor is quite common, Cappert said, so technicians can breeze through jobs without getting hung up on the unfamiliar.

Finding a niche is the best way to succeed in the business, Cappert said. Being a gas-tank guru or a carburetor queen works well within an individual shop, but becoming an expert on a particular model is the future of the profession, he said. Already, many auto shops have moved past the all-you-can-eat style of repair and limited their work to vehicles made by one automaker. For Cappert, the other half of success lies in continued education. With auto technology advancing as fast as it has, no amount of past experience can equip a technician for what's down the road.

"This is a trade where you just don't stop," he said. "It's not like you learn something and just practice it for the rest of your career."

At Lovric's shop, he and the other technicians attend seminars several times a year to keep updated, though his continuing education isn't limited to workshops in hotel conference rooms.

"You learn something every day - I don't care how good a tech you are," he said.

But a good tech needs good tools, and most auto technicians are responsible for providing their own.

That can get expensive. A quarter-sized socket can put Lovric out \$30, and the behemoth toolbox can cost \$6,000 alone.

"You always need something," Lovric said. "You can buy tools for 20 years and still need more." Most auto technicians are paid hourly, though some may instead receive a weekly commission.

The average hourly wage is around \$14, but some master mechanics can earn \$70,000 to \$100,000 per year, according to the Labor Bureau.

But for auto technicians such as Lovric, it isn't the money that keeps them in the shop.

"I'm not getting rich, but I'm happy," he said, standing in the oil-stained driveway in front of the old shop. "I just like to work on cars. It's a challenge to work on each one."

Seattle Times August 25, 2002

New title: AUTO TECHNICIAN

Old title: CAR MECHANIC

How many: 480,000 (NATIONWIDE)

Demand: NEARLY 100,000 MORE BY 2010

Pay: VARIES WIDELY, FROM ABOUT \$14 AN HOUR TO \$100,000 A YEAR