Dealer Case Study: Combating a Local Tech Shortage

How Colorado Boat Center used a one-week, on-the-job working, wrenching interview to hire three marine technicians from outside its region

A special MRAA Q&A conversation with Eric Smith, Colorado Boat Center

Equipped with the right mentality and strategies, using a custom hiring process and labor search can expand beyond simply hiring talent recruiters and scouring your local employment scene. Colorado Boat Center, an MRAA Gold Member, used a week-long, on-the-job working interviews to help it fill vital technician roles at its dealership. General Manager Eric Smith shares his insights and tips about how Colorado Boat Center used a new hiring approach to overcome its recent tech shortage and strengthen its workforce.

MRAA: Has a shortage of technicians been a problem for Colorado Boat Center?
Eric Smith: Absolutely. You could go back 15 years, but it is progressively getting worse. It's no secret that the trades aren't being taught in schools. We have a generation that isn't going to trade school. The techs have gotten older, and the seasoned techs are retiring. It's hard to find new blood.

Tell us about your particular situation that led you to look for a new solution.
A year ago in the fall, we were sitting fine. Then in June, one of our techs indicated he would retire. That was fine. That left two - one master tech and one experienced tech. Then in September, a second tech put in notice. That left one tech to go through winterization.

We had been actively looking for a third technician, but now we were looking for two techs.
We were using Indeed. We were using all the traditional tools. We were using an outside recruiter. Of course, when you're using a recruiter, everyone else who is using the recruiter is looking for the exact same person.

We were having no luck. And then, right after the MRAA Conference last year, our master tech gave his notice. He was scooped up by an OEM.

Now it's December — luckily not June — and we were left with no techs. The good news was that it allowed us to re-write the rules and start at the ground floor. Hindsight is 20/20. What had happened was that one technician, the master tech, was a bear to work with. Even though he was good, it was causing problems. Production was good, but if employees don't want to work there, you're going to end up in the situation we did. At the time, I thought because we needed a master tech, we just had to deal with it. I don't believe that now.

What changed your mind?
Between myself and our president, we can teach anybody, I can train anybody. We can give them the schooling; we can give them the training. But can't teach them the personality.

To find that, I had to think a little bit differently. Our goal in refilling the service department was to hire based off personality. They need to know what a wrench is, of course, but more so we needed the right personality. Before we started our new system, I was so desperate I was making job offers without even meeting people. That's not right.

Tell us about your new system.
We're a landlocked state. No one thinks of Colorado as a boating Mecca. And that translates to the workforce. We needed to look outside of our local area. We reached out to vendor partners, sales reps

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and technician reps. The thing about techs is that they talk a lot. We told our reps, 'You know us, you've been in our store, you know what we're like to work with. If you hear anything, let us know.'

And through that ground floor network, we were able to make connections. After that, we needed to get people into the facility. We needed to get them into the department so we could see if it was worth it for them to uproot themselves, and whether they were a fit. We created a one-week interview on the job.

We all know the expense of hiring people. For this, we had to fly people out and put them up. Still, that one-week cost was worth it, versus the three-month cost of hiring the wrong people. Some took vacation time. One took time off. Each of them was working for other companies. When they were here, we paid them just like they were normal technicians.

To make it work, you need to identify people you want to bring in, and then you need to set up a week's worth of work. Then you can assess them in your working environment. Throughout the entire week, we're open and available, talking to them, asking how they're working through the department. On the last day, we did a final interview. To gauge if they were liking it or not. And then we made offers. For this process, I flew five people out. Of those five people, we hired three of them.

Did it take convincing for people to try this unconventional hiring approach?
The first guy was all in. The second two I had to convince that it was a good idea. Asking them to take a week of their time, away from their current situations and their families, was hard. But they were wiling for the opportunity to look at us.

And when they flew out, I wasn't saying they had to accept the job. One of the individuals decided it wasn't the right fit. OK. But I would rather know that right off the bat. For the most part, I had an indication pretty early on of who would work out. I had come up with a pay plan and offer prior to the end of the week.

When did you have them start after that?
I would have liked to have had them out here within two weeks, but there are things that have to get moved. For two techs, it took a month and one two months.

Other than the on-the-job evaluation, was there more to the interview process?

One of the main reasons why it's important to get them out here for a week is that we want them to see the area. See why they should want to live there. One day we took them around for a tour of the area. And we asked about what type of property they were looking for. We set them up with options. We drove them by properties and set them up with real estate agents.

In addition to finding good people, another way that dealers have tried to combat tech shortages is through training. How have you approached that?
Our initial onboarding is done by our president and myself. Essentially it is a lay of the land, not how to work on this boat. It's more about 'these are our processes.' With technical training, we pay for off-hours training. We will pay additional hours to study afterward. We do manufacturer training as well. Our techs go to at least one school per year. We also do monthly training. With the people we brought in, they're new to how we're doing things, so they need to learn our processes. We go through them once a month.

Did the people you brought in have marine backgrounds?
All of them had marine backgrounds. One tech we hired had been trained on the automotive side, but she wasn't getting the training or the schooling she needed to advance her career and skills. Honestly, this method is more time consuming. But you're hiring staff, and you get what you make of it. If you as an owner or manager are making the effort, you'll receive the effort back. We get caught up in the daily tasks and expect Indeed to send us the right person, but you have to be proactive.

Having your shop's decision makers and leaders play an active, participating role within the hiring process is critical for your entire team's overall success, especially if you want to share with these new employees your expectations, processes and evaluate both their personalities and how they mesh with the rest of the crew. Recruiting candidates and bringing them in for paid working interviews is one method that has worked for Colorado Boat Center to mend its technician shortage and enhance its workforce. While it may take additional time and commitments from everyone at the shop, the long-term advantages likely will outweigh the short-term expenses and challenges. For additional workforce best practices and related resources, visit the MRAA Resource Center.