



By Marcy Tieger
Contributing Writer

All things being equal on the shop floor

Many reasons have been given for why women do not go into collision repair. A closer examination of these reasons confirms misinformation, stereotyping and unfounded assumptions have frequently deprived shops of a valuable and eager segment of the workforce.

When the United States entered the Second World War, the number of women in the workforce increased 50 percent. Necessity drove that shift. There was no time for stereotypes, bias or preconceived notions about what women were capable of doing.

The 2004 survey of the collision industry conducted by the I-CAR Education Foundation confirmed that women represented less than one percent of the technician workforce. While the reasons for this trend vary, the numbers confirm one thing for certain: the collision industry needs more entry-level technicians, and a significant part of the available workforce — women — has not been tapped for the job.

Why more young women are not drawn to the industry, and in particular, the production side of the business, may be due in part to the fact that we are not actively recruiting them into the industry. In her article, "Looking For A Few Good Women," Kelly Skahan, a prep technician in Seattle, interviewed instructors in auto body classes. She found that one problem is that, when students are in the formative teen years, the schools are not promoting the automotive trades, but focusing on degrees and corporate employment.

Skahan's article also suggested that part of the problem is our tendency to focus on traditional male and female roles, instead of looking at what a person is good at and interested in and encouraging young people in that direction.

If you are working with a local high school counselor or ROP instructor, let him or her know that you are serious about promoting young women who are considering working in your business, attending your outreach program, educational seminars, etc. That counselor or instructor will be an advocate for your recruitment effort and reinforce this with any young female who may be questioning whether there really is a place for her in your shop.

There is nothing that says you shouldn't start your outreach to even younger girls. Shop owner Cathy Reichow, writing for *ABRN's* sister publication *Motor Age*, assists Girl Scouts who want to earn their car care badge by teaching them basic vehicle maintenance such as checking all the fluids, checking tires, using safety precautions and familiarity with the owner's manual.

At the outset, it is important to note that many of the reasons a shop owner or manager may choose not to hire a female technician over a male technician, assuming equal skills and experience, are prohibited by state and federal law. That said, one cannot with a straight face overlook the fact that introducing a 19-year-old, top-of-her-class technical school graduate into a shop of all-male technicians who are at least twice her age might present "extra work" for the shop manager.

Ironically, however, this "extra work" to assure a smooth transition and a welcoming work environment, is the very thing that employers tend to overlook as part of the integration (and retention) of all new employees. Indeed, many of *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" acknowledge the importance of a warm welcome of new employees as part of their workplace assimilation strategy. The fact that part of the manager's sensitivity under this hypothetical is integrating a woman into a male-dominated workplace is really secondary.

The collision industry is going through radical changes. Among the changes are a greater focus on efficiency through lean processes, demand for reduction in repair cycle time and high Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) scores. The backbone of the CSI is the quality of communication with and treatment of the customer. Think "TLC" (tender loving care) when you read CSI. Insurance company print ads and commercials reinforce this theme with terms like "safe," "understanding" and even "[accident] forgiveness."

Why women are more attuned to TLC issues — whether we are born with it or socialized (raised) that way — is a topic for another day. I say this because many highly successful businessmen possess TLC traits such as empathy, compassion, good listening skills and kindness, and will readily admit that those traits have served them well in business.

All things being equal, you have two technicians of equal skill, but one of them possesses TLC skills and the other does not; who would you rather have the insurance re-inspector talk to about the need for extra hours on a job?

In an industry reeling from a shortage of new recruits, it makes good business sense to consider the consequences of failing to actively cultivate women — the other half of the available workforce. Moreover, there is strong evidence that a further byproduct of more women on the shop floor will be elevated CSI scores, and that's a factor that benefits everyone. ■

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Women ready to rise in Phoenix

The Women's Industry Network (WIN), a new organization formed to develop opportunities for women in the collision industry, will hold its inaugural conference April 29 to May 1 at the Hilton Phoenix Airport Hotel in Phoenix. WIN's mission is to encourage, develop and cultivate opportunities to attract women to the collision repair industry, while recognizing excellence and promoting leadership. Members of the group participated in the Women's Conference, held last May, which was hosted by Assured Performance Network.

"For the past two years, we've seen more and more women looking for a place to connect with other women in the industry while we were at NACE," says WIN advisory board member Gigi Walker, of Walker's Auto Body in Concord, Calif. "We wanted to put together a forum where we could discuss our problems and concerns, and implement some solutions."

The conference will include sessions on business strategies, ways to recruit more women to the collision industry, working with local vocational schools and performance management techniques. Speakers include Susan Hood, vice president of claims at State Farm; Mary Mahoney, vice president of national marketing at Enterprise Rent-A-Car; and Laura Angell, I-CAR instructor from Warren Technical Center in Lakewood, Colo.

Cost for the conference is \$325 per attendee, including meals and seminars. For more information on the conference or WIN, visit www.womensindustrynetwork.com.