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THE GREAT TECHNICIAN HUNT: DALLAS-AREA DEALERS AND THEIR INDUSTRY ALLIES TAKE AIM AT LOCAL SCHOOLS

By Wayne Endicott

*The technician crisis is as wide and high as the prairie sky, deep
in the heart of Texas.*

*Enter TXite, a posse of dealers and related-industry leaders intent
on reversing the negative trend.*

Faced with a growing shortage of technicians that threatens to severely cripple equipment service and damage the industry, a group of Texas equipment-owning companies has banded together to find solutions to their mutual problem. Attacking the situation at the grass roots level, distributors, contractors and truck fleet owners formed TXite to aid and abet local education programs in attracting young people to the equipment industry.

"We need to find a way to attract technicians to our industry, then train and retain them," says Larry Wright, service development manager of Darr Equipment of Irving, Texas, a large local Caterpillar dealer. "Last year, our company alone needed 150 new technicians. This year our need is 20 more than last year. Employment in this industry stands at 100 percent. The result is that equipment owners in this area face a bidding war to obtain the technicians we need."

Darr and a group of other local employers decided enough was enough. About two years ago, they formed TXite to address the problem by working with local educators to develop programs to recruit and train young Texans in today's atmosphere of sophisticated technology.

The TXite effort is still in its formative stage, admits Michael L. Detzler, president of Continental Equipment Co., L.P., of Dallas, and an avid TXite supporter.

"At this stage of the game, it is still somewhat of a theoretical effort," he says. TXite is mostly a political arm working to open the eyes of educators and politicians as to what is needed and then to convince them that if they get on board, there will be jobs available to people who go through their programs."

To that end, TXite has developed a mission statement, a simple two-sentence statement lays out the focus of the group as follows:

- Increase the number of qualified technicians by supporting public technical education benefiting the industry.
- Share the vision that producing a well educated, well trained work force is an investment for a prosperous future.

To accomplish these ends, TXite's activities include working collectively to secure adequate public funding for technical education centers that meet certain criteria set out by the group; helping to define and support curriculum necessary to provide qualified graduates; identifying and promoting new opportunities to improve Texas' system of technical education; informing the public of the need for high-quality technical education; and informing the public of the role that the equipment industry plays in the Texas economy.

TARNISHED IMAGE

The shortage dilemma in Texas and nationwide, says Detzler, is compounded by an image problem. "We're at the low end of the spectrum, image-wise," he laments. "High school students graduate with an idea that they don't want to dirty their hands. They want to go into a job where they can sit at a desk and run a computer, not get all grimy working in a shop somewhere.

"The schools have fostered that problem by suggesting that the trades are for the student that is below average. There is a stigma attached to the word 'shop,' that suggests only the less gifted student should go into the trades. In reality, the opposite is true. We need bright high school graduates to enter our industry and we need to find a way to train them and make them viable workers. The goal of TXite is to provide that vehicle."

Detzler laments that the problem appears to be culture based. "Programs in the rural areas do not seem to carry the same stigma as they do in urban areas. In rural areas, Future Farmers of America and similar organizations seem to have no trouble attracting young people who want to be equipment technicians. They are used to getting dirty and sweaty working on farms. To many, the equipment technician represents a step forward. In the urban

areas, the opposite seems to be true. Yet it is here that the biggest need exists."

Wright sees the program as three-pronged. "First, we need to develop a curriculum that can be applied across the board at a variety of schools. Locally (in the Dallas area), we are working to develop this curriculum with Eastfield College. Curriculum is fundamental to everything you do," Wright avers.

"We're working in partnership with Eastfield and Texas State Technical College in Waco (actually Marshall, Texas) to prepare a curriculum for Eastfield that is based in large part on TSTC's current curriculum. Curriculum involves everything—course materials and literature, industry specifications, capital equipment on which students may work. This last one is a real weighty problem. Obviously schools can't afford a big investment in this area. They also have storage problems and disposal problems. We look to local equipment owners to lend equipment such as engines and hydraulic simulators to the schools to provide the opportunity for students to work on equipment currently in use. Otherwise, they are forced to use outdated and obsolete equipment for their classes. That benefits no one."

Lynn A. McKinnie, equipment department training coordinator for Zachry Construction Corp., a San Antonio-based contractor, and current chairman of the operations committee of TXite, agrees that curriculum is a problem.

"We've found that the most advanced curriculum in Texas is at TSTC," he says. But it's not in a format that makes it possible to transport it into other schools. It's not written out. Each instructor there works from his own notes. Our No. 1 objective continues to be to get a curriculum finalized and written so that it can be adopted and used by other schools.

HELP TRAIN INSTRUCTORS

A second major part of the program is faculty training. Here, equipment owners offer their resources to enable instructors to stay current with the latest techniques and equipment. Says Wright, "We have resources available to help train instructors in the dynamic new equipment and technology. Virtually all dealers are affiliated with equipment manufacturers who conduct ongoing training for their customers. We can make those training sessions available to instructors to update their knowledge. In fact, we have invited instructors to take part in Caterpillar's dealer school and will help fund their attendance at those schools."

McKinnie agrees with the idea that equipment owners have a role to play in training instructors. "You can't expect a tax-supported school to buy a \$100,000 piece of equipment, then go to the expense of training an instructor in its hydraulic, electrical and electronic systems. We can help by inviting them to our classes. Virtually all dealers sponsor periodic classes to train their own technicians in new techniques and new equipment. We should be fostering the idea that any time one of these classes is being held, we should consider inviting instructors at the various colleges to attend as well and update their knowledge.

"As things currently stand, instructors are using donated, obsolete, outdated equipment. They get tired of fighting the battle, so they just keep on using it. The old stuff has been there for a long time. It's fine for learning the basics, but it is no good to work on. We are hoping that equipment owners will see fit to loan current, but unused equipment, to the schools so that students are confronting existing, not obsolete, technology."

The third part of the problem is recruitment. A recent newcomer to the table is Whit Perryman, president of Vermeer Equipment Co. of Irving, Texas. He, too, sees the region's technician crisis as cause for real concern.

"It doesn't solve anybody's problems if all the equipment owners keep hiring each others technicians away from each other. That's where TXite hopefully can begin to solve our problems. As I see it, we need to begin right at the high school level to make students aware of the needs and opportunities of the industry. We need first to attract them, then educate them. We've gotten involved with TXite (human resources director Marilyn Brown is the company's representative) to find out how we can become involved. We're still exploring what our role may be in this organization. We think it will include a variety of things, including exploring how we pay for the program, what benefits we can derive, and what we can contribute in terms of curriculum, staffing, providing the right kind of equipment, or maybe a combination of all of these things. It is particularly of concern to me, since our company represents the fastest growing part of the equipment market-trenchers and directional boring machines. We need to see to it that instructors are familiar with current equipment, not stuff that is six years old."

"A recent survey suggested that the industry needs 1,250 new technicians per year just in Texas alone," Detzler points out. "While TXite can help address this problem, it's obvious to me that we can't solve the problem through this resource alone. We are involved as a company with six to eight different programs, most with specific schools. To me, TXite represents a way to coordinate efforts in recruitment. I think it is more a political arm

than anything else at this point. It gives us an opportunity to open a school's eyes to see just what is needed. We need to show educators that if they train these young people, there will be jobs waiting for them."

GRASSROOTS RECRUITMENT

With that in mind, Continental Equipment Co. is approaching recruitment at the grass roots level. "We've taken our booth to student career days, for example," Detzler says. "We've also worked with Oklahoma State University in cooperation with Komatsu where that company provides OSU with textbooks and equipment as well as training for instructors. We have been able to hire some of their graduates."

Jim Gau, fleet manager for the City of University Park, and current president of TXite's North Texas Chapter, discusses the futility of his past efforts to recruit technicians. "In the last year and a half, I've twice placed ads for skilled technicians," he says. I've only been able to hire two that meet our criteria. Most of those who answered the ads nowhere nearly possessed the skills we require. This is in spite of the fact that we think that we offer as good or better a working environment in terms of a modern shop and cleaner working conditions than many other equipment owners.

"Additionally, the shortage of skilled manpower is driving labor prices way up. The average starting salary fresh out of school is \$10.37 per hour. To get a good technician, we're having to offer in the neighborhood of \$17 or \$18 per hour. For a really seasoned technician, it is not uncommon to see wages of \$20 or more."

Gau says that TXite needs to address an image problem among teachers as well as students. "They are conveying to the student the message that vocational education represents a second-class way of life. So the students come away thinking 'I am much too bright to throw my life away in that type of job.'"

Gau suggests that TXite is bucking the idea that getting sweaty and getting your hands dirty is somehow demeaning, but even when a student shows aptitude for things mechanical, heavy equipment loses out. "We face competition from motorcycles and cars. We need to direct their attention toward our industry so that we get the brightest and best students into our programs. We need to fill our shops not with part changers but with technicians. We need to make school counselors and the public at large see that these are not 'grease monkeys' we are training but skilled people who can diagnose the most complex problem and fix it."

One avenue that has had some impact for TXite is the sponsorship of a career day in conjunction with the Associated General Contractors. More than 1,300 high school students attended the Dallas-area program, Gau says, and 60 of them stopped at the TXite booth. Of that number, 12 were seniors. The group also participated in a career day at Eastfield College attended by 350 students, three of whom signed up to enter that school's program.

Gau also points out that TXite is attempting to marry business with good high school shop programs. "Unfortunately," he laments, "not all of the programs are good. Only about 10% of them meet what we consider the minimum standard."

Gau admits that it always comes down to money. He says the pay scale of instructors is not encouraging. "We need to find a way to compensate instructors so that they can afford to remain instructors. We find now that most instructors teach for nine months out of the year, then they go to work in shops over the summer to supplement their meager income. Therefore, they can't afford to go to school in their off months to bring their teaching skills up to a level commensurate with today's technology."

When all is said and done, however, the circle comes back to training. "We must find a way to get the job of training back into the schools and out of our shops," Detzler says. "Obviously, there is a funding problem. The schools tell us that it costs \$40 an hour in tuition and \$100 an hour in overhead to train a single student. We in industry need to develop a way to help fund these programs."

Wright points out that equipment manufacturers, too, have a stake in the game. "For the second school year in a row (1999-2000), we have worked with the Caterpillar Foundation to make funds available to our partner here in Dallas, Eastfield College," he says. "Cat is matching our donation of \$25,000 with a like amount to enable Eastfield to continue curriculum development, equipment acquisition and faculty development."

But competition for the cream-of-the-crop kids is fierce, says Gau.

"We are competing against a lot of different people in trying to establish our program. We have to find a way to cull out the best students with the most potential and then get them into school. Vocational education is on the ropes. The high schools have nearly abandoned technical training because of the cost. Instead of developing their own programs, they are bussing students to the junior colleges. Despite our efforts, Eastfield College actually

had to cancel a class that was scheduled for this summer. Now, we are just hoping to get enough kids interested to have a class there this fall."

Working with TXite to develop the program at Eastfield is its Auto Technology Program director, Curt Jenkins. The Mesquite, Texas, school is part of the Dallas County Community College District. Jenkins began teaching there five years ago as a part-time instructor and has been teaching full time for the past two years.

"The solution to the problem of not having enough techs is to hire and train locally. The rural area schools, like those in Marshall and Sweetwater, Texas, are not experiencing the problem. Their programs fill up. It's in the urban areas where the real problem lies.

"With TXite, we have a real chance to make it work. We need equipment owners to support our program with things like equipment donations and loans, special grants to help fund this training, internships and scholarships. Our program is designed for students to spend eight weeks in the classroom, then eight weeks in the field. We need distributors, contractors, truck fleet owners and other equipment companies to make the field training happen- and provide compensation to those students during that eight week period."

Jenkins points out that so far, 12 young men have taken part in the program at night classes. "The real challenge will be to get a daytime program going. Our program is unique. We need to get away from the two semesters of automotive classes that were common before and get into heavy diesel technology, hydraulics, electrical and electronics."

Though very much a fledgling organization, TXite has set its sights high for solving the technician shortage in its state. Wright, one of the group's "founding fathers" sums up the plan this way: "We're starting from scratch, but we're gaining momentum. Eastfield is only our initial effort. We need to find a system here that we can then transfer successfully to other urban areas of the state. We need to follow up our efforts in Dallas-Ft. Worth with equally successful programs in places like east Texas, San Antonio and Houston."

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Distributor Resources from AEDF

AEDF has published a complete book of standards comprising required skills and knowledge that industry needs from entry-level service technicians. A collaborative effort of distributors, manufacturers and vocational school

educators, the standards were compiled three years ago by AEDF's Technical Training Committee, chaired by Bill Borre, Patten Tractor Co.

Distributors can use the standards as well as an entire box-full of AEDF recruitment tools when approaching local schools. The standards are available on the AED Web site, www.aednet.org. AEDF's "Join the Tech Team" how-to kit includes two video presentations, two different posters and printed materials designed to enlighten students, parents, teachers and counselors about the advantageous career opportunities in the construction equipment industry. Call the Foundation for details at (630) 574-0650.