

The Columbus Dispatch

Sept. 3, 2006

It's steady work: Pay, stability make blue-collar careers worth a second look

By Paul Wilson

When Matt Lambert finished a four-year stint as a firefighter for the U.S. Navy, he returned to central Ohio looking for a career.

He found one as an auto technician at Ricart Automotive.

"I knew that there were cars that were always going to break down and need to be repaired," said Lambert, 25.

Experts say his thinking isn't faulty.

Because while it's no secret that jobs are available in medical and service fields, the demand for auto technicians, carpenters and plumbers is growing at a significant clip, according to federal statistics.

The jobs share a few traits: They pay fairly well, usually between \$30,000 and \$40,000, but they also require some training and a lot of hard work.

"There's a real shortage in quasi-blue-collar professions," said John Hollon, editor of Workforce Management magazine. "Electricians, car technicians, plumbers -- a lot of those things aren't very sexy, but try to get yourself an electrician to come out to your house. They can charge top dollar, especially now when people are spending top dollar to fix up homes."

In 2004, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted that the number of jobs in the United States will increase from 146 million to about 165 million by 2014, an increase of 13 percent. Leading the pack were occupations such as sales representatives, registered nurses, managers and teachers.

But Hollon's "quasi-blue-collar" jobs weren't far behind. Many are expected to increase at a faster rate than the national average. The jobs also require moderate to long-term on-the-job training or some post-secondary schooling, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Meanwhile, jobs at farms and ranches will continue to decline, and technical advances are expected to cut many clerical jobs at offices, to say nothing of the expected decline in manufacturing, according to the 2004 report.

Advancing technology has helped increase the need for workers who can replace an alternator or rewire a house. At the same time, fewer people are learning skills at schools, where vocational classes have been cut in recent years, just as the work has gotten more complex, Hollon said.

But if the jobs are out there, and they pay well, why aren't people rushing to them? Hollon said that should happen soon, after decades of parents steering kids away from blue-collar jobs and toward college degrees.

"More and more people look at jobs getting outsourced and think, 'Gee, what jobs are safe?' " he said. "People are going to go more and more into these jobs now because they will not be outsourced and they pay a good wage."

But much of the work providing opportunities also requires a lot of specialized knowledge. The evolution of automobiles --- fuel-injection systems rather than carburetors and more computerized systems --- means it requires more training to figure out why your car is making that sound.

At Ricart Automotive, employees in the service department are no longer called "mechanics." They're called "technicians," and if that sounds like a change to make the job sound more important, think about this: About 80 percent of vehicles have electronic controls, compared with about 20 percent a decade or two ago, said Don Andres, parts and service director.

"A technician today spends three-quarters of his time diagnosing," he said. "There's rarely a time a dealer will pass on a qualified technician" who applies for a job.

More than 100,000 jobs are available at auto dealerships across the country, nearly 40,000 of which are in the service department, according to a January report by Harris Interactive and commissioned by Automotive Retailing Today.

Ricart Automotive and other auto dealers recruit high-school students and have apprenticeship programs for college students. A qualified technician applying at Ricart is likely to be hired and can expect to pull in \$18 to \$28 an hour.

With more training necessary --- Ricart technicians now usually must have completed two years of college --- would-be technicians should make sure they know what they're getting into, said Keith Randleman, a Ricart technician who has repaired vehicles for 26 years. The work is hard.

"I'm not saying it's not a good thing to go into," Randleman said. "Just make sure it's what you really want to do. If (a person) is interested in it and has a passion for it, I'd say get into it. But be careful."

Many of Hollon's quasi-blue-collar openings revolve around the home: repairs and renovations.

Steve Blake has installed spiral staircases in some of the fancier homes in central Ohio. But about a year ago, Blake decided to branch out. He bought Buckeye Marble Granite and Tile and renamed his company Curves & More. He now employs four people in his

Petzinger Road business, building countertops, shower stalls and the like out of granite and marble.

Business has been good. In a year, Blake hopes to have eight employees, and has two positions available now.

"I just don't see Columbus not building," he said. "The countertop business is good because even if they don't want to buy a new home, they want something nice and will have something installed in their current home."

Homer Myers, of Zanesville, is a stone mason who works for Blake. He makes about \$30,000 a year, and says his income has always provided for his family "putting clothes on their backs and food in their stomachs."

Roger Doles, a 22-year-old Ohio State student, started working for Blake about four months ago. He said he likes his job and hopes to use what he is learning after he graduates.

"This is a lot better than flipping burgers," Doles said. "You learn how to use tools. I like doing this kind of work -- there's a skill to it that I'm trying to learn and take pride in."

[Photo outline:](#) Keith Randleman, a technician at Ricart Automotive, repairs a vehicle's air conditioner at the dealership.