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JOURNAL

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JUNE 2019

Why shop injuries are rising
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SAFETY ALERT

As shop injuries rise, dealership service departments work to reduce risks

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When a fire ripped through an Alabama dealership's service department in 2017, killing three shop employees and injuring two others, the accident was a grim reminder that auto repair is dangerous and poses numerous daily risks.

The headline-grabbing incident was one of thousands in dealership service departments and other repair shops that year, causing 14,430 injuries that were reported to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

As new-vehicle dealerships increasingly rely on fixed operations for revenue, and the flat-rate pay system rewards service technicians who work quickly, some industry analysts warn that shops are at increased risk of employee injuries.

Many injuries reported to OSHA are minor, such as cuts, bruises and muscle strains. But the total in 2017, the last year for which data are available, was 20 percent higher than in 2013. The list included 1,120 broken bones, 30 amputations and 50 work-related deaths.

In OSHA's investigation of the fire at the Alabama dealership, Carl Cannon Chevrolet-Buick-GMC in Jasper, the agency levied a \$114,074 fine after it found that workers used a flammable brake wash to clean a service pit.

The dealership did not respond to requests for comment.

Even minor shop injuries can increase a dealership's insurance costs. Dealerships can incur additional expenses to hire and train a replacement if an injury sidelines a productive technician. Nearly one-third of shop injuries idle techs for more than 10 days, OSHA says.

And serious injuries or a death will attract OSHA investigators to find the cause and often result in a fine, says Charlie Ayers, president of the Coordinating Committee for Automotive Repair. The committee partners with OSHA, the EPA and the U.S. Department of Transportation to provide online safety courses for repair shops and promote best environmental and safety practices.



USING YOUR HEAD

Hard hats and safety glasses help curb lift injuries

The auto repair industry's reliance on vehicle lifts places a unique burden on dealership shop managers to provide regular safety training for service techs, especially in head protection, says the president of the Automotive Lift Institute.

"Our industry asks folks to do something no other industry does — to put themselves physically under tens of thousands of pounds of metal every day," says the institute's Bob O'Gorman.

The organization recommends that lifts be inspected at least annually by an institute-certified inspector, and more often if they get heavy use. In its training, the institute also urges techs to wear hard hats or "bump caps" when they work under lifts. O'Gorman concedes such protection isn't widely used.

"It depends on the type of work you're doing," he says. "You see people [protecting their heads] when they're doing hot work — welding or grinding or something like that."

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration doesn't break out how many

injuries occur from using vehicle lifts, and the institute does not keep such statistics. OSHA says service technicians suffered 1,950 head injuries from all causes in 2017, the last year for which figures are available.

Charlie Ayers, president of the Coordinating Committee for Automotive Repair,

agrees that dealerships could reduce head injuries by requiring or recommending that techs wear hard hats. But he doubts they would win widespread acceptance because "they're uncomfortable, hot and they can get in the way."

About half of the head injuries reported to OSHA in 2017 affected eyes. That statistic, Ayers says, indicates that techs also aren't wearing safety glasses, which he believes

should be required as well.

Ayers, a former corporate safety trainer, says he has seen shop employees working underneath cars or trucks on lifts frequently get hit by parts and debris falling from the vehicles. After he mandated use of safety glasses, he says, "the rate of injuries went down and as a result our insurance costs went down."

— Rick Popely



Ayers: Glasses use cuts costs.

Dealership executives who regard safety training merely as an expense, for the purchase of training materials or on-site instruction and the time it takes employees away from producing revenue, are shortsighted, Ayers told *Fixed Ops Journal*.

"If a person doesn't get hurt and stays productive, I'm getting back the money I spent on training," Ayers says. "You're lessening the chances for an incident, the severity of an incident and the chances of OSHA being in your shop. Everyone says there is a big shortage of techs, so we need to take care of the ones we have."

Under the gun

The jump in shop injuries may be caused in part by constant pressure on service departments to crank out more repair jobs to increase revenue, says Bob O'Gorman, president of the Automotive Lift Institute. The institute certifies the manufacturing, installation, inspection and maintenance of hydraulic lifts and provides online training for service techs.

"In today's service and repair environment, a lot of emphasis is put on moving from one job to the next, and it has a lot to do with time,"

"Look what an injury does to the tech's life. He's still got bills to pay and he's not earning money. It's not good for the company, and it's not good for the employee or his family, either."

DAVID STERK, assistant CFO, Ciocca Dealerships

O'Gorman says. "If there's not continual training, you're going to focus on time issues and make mistakes."

Ayers says the flat-rate system, which benefits technicians who complete jobs faster than standard book times, likely contributes to increased injuries as well. An even greater factor, he says, is the aging work force among techs.

"The chances of them getting hurt is greater now because they're older," he says. "Their bodies aren't as strong as they used to be. Take

a guy who's 49 and been doing this job for 29 years. Are you going to teach this person something new [about safety]? In his mind, probably not. If he's never been seriously hurt, it's hard to get him to wear safety gear."

Ayers says he thinks most shops, including those at dealerships, would flunk a spot inspection by OSHA. "They don't know they're out of compliance because they haven't had an incident. Typically, this subject doesn't come up on their radar screens until there is an incident, and then it's too late."



Parnell: Techs receive training.

Preventive medicine

About 15 years ago, Westside Lexus in Houston discovered it was violating a federal mandate covering fuel storage, mainly because it misunderstood an OSHA regulation, says Robert Parnell, the dealership's service and

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parts director. The store paid a small fine, Parnell adds.

The dealership now relies on KPA Services, which sells compliance audit services and training to dealerships and other industries, to provide safety monitoring for its shop and instruction in safe practices for its employees. Since the initial violation, Parnell says the dealership has had a clean record with OSHA and no major injuries among service employees.

"They come in once a quarter and basically do a mock OSHA inspection," Parnell says of KPA. "They look at every possible hazard, every possible violation and every possible safety issue. If they see a bench grinder with a frayed cord, they take a picture of it, post it on their website and then we have to correct it."

In addition, Westside Lexus technicians, body shop workers and porters meet with a KPA representative every three months for a training session on a specific topic, such as eye protection. Once a year, KPA conducts a training session for all service employees that covers broader safety topics and changes in regulations.

OSHA mandates safety training for all dealership service employees before they start working and annual training thereafter. The federal Department of Transportation requires new employees to be trained to work with hazardous shop materials, such as airbag inflators and waste oil, during their first 90 days on the job and every three years after that.

Safety by committee

Ciocca Dealerships, which operates 16 franchised dealerships and three collision centers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, uses the Ethos Group, a compliance services company, for on-site safety audits and online training for employees. The dealership group holds monthly meetings of a safety committee that includes a manager and a nonmanagement employee from each service department and body shop.

"If you have a working safety committee in Pennsylvania, you are entitled to a discount on workmen's compensation insurance," says David Sterk, Ciocca's assistant CFO and the chairman of the safety committee. "But once we started, we realized that's not your biggest savings. By not having injuries, the biggest savings is in the health of your employees."

"If our technicians aren't there to sell their time, that gets very, very expensive for the dealership," he says. "Look what an injury does to the tech's life. He's still got bills to pay and he's not earning money. It's not good for

10 commandments for shop safety

Many shop injuries can be prevented by following basic safety rules that sometimes get forgotten amid the daily demands in a busy service department. Here are some common-sense safety practices offered by dealers and industry consultants:

1. Encourage service technicians to wear safety glasses at all times. Require glasses when techs work under vehicles and use grinders, drills and other rotational tools.
2. Clean up spills immediately. Keep shop floors clear of tools, parts and equipment to avoid falls, slips and trips.
3. Require technicians to wear closed-toe footwear with nonskid soles.
4. Once a hazardous material is placed in a secondary container, label it clearly.
5. Make data sheets on shop materials safety readily accessible in case of emergencies.
6. If a tool or equipment isn't working properly, label it with what's wrong and take it out of service.
7. Make sure the area beneath a lift is clear of tools and equipment before lowering a vehicle.
8. When using a drive-on-type lift, chock at least one wheel with wheel stops.
9. Reinforce shop safety as a priority by providing training more regularly than once a year.
10. Convene regular meetings of service department managers and employees to review best safety practices.

the company, and it's not good for the employee or his family, either."

Ethos Group conducts quarterly safety assessments of all Ciocca dealerships. The committee works with shop managers to ensure that potential violations and safety problems are addressed.

Having nonmanagement techs on the committee has helped promote safety awareness and acceptance of best practices in service departments, Sterk adds. "It's your buddy who's working next to you every day in the shop" who's pointing out risks, such as not

wearing safety glasses, or spilled oil on the shop floor, he says.

Accidents and injuries are bound to happen in service departments because of all the potential hazards, Sterk concedes. But constant reminders and a shop culture that values employee safety can reduce the risks, he says.

"Over time, people start to think just a little differently," he says. "They care a little more about where they work and the condition of where they work, and injuries go down."

Best practices

Ayers calls the dealership service department a "hostile, volatile environment" that poses numerous safety risks under the best conditions. He says he is continually surprised at what he sees, such as a technician wearing flip-flops instead of steel-toed boots in the shop.

In addition to the annual safety training required by OSHA, Ayers recommends that dealerships conduct periodic training to reinforce best practices. Some dealerships have staff meetings every week or two at which they discuss a different safety issue, he says.

"If I take the time to train you and show that I care for your well-being, you're more likely to stay with me," Ayers says.

Parnell of Westside Lexus says the quarterly safety meetings don't generate much griping among his technicians, even if taking them off-line briefly cuts into their productivity.

"It's their own eyes and other body parts they're protecting," Parnell says. "The payback is that the technicians respect the employer for providing and requiring" safety training.

"It creates awareness that results in fewer accidents, prevents injuries and improves morale," he says.

Ayers acknowledges that most dealers and shop managers view OSHA the same way they see the Internal Revenue Service: "You never want them in your office." But he notes that the agency provides free, on-site safety assessments upon request.

Many dealerships shun that service, Ayers says, because they fear the OSHA findings could lead to penalties for rules violations. But he notes that OSHA uses such voluntary inspections not to initiate noncompliance proceedings, but to explain what the shop needs to do.

"You could have the worst shop they've ever seen, and it won't lead to a violation," he said. "Not enough people take advantage of that."

Such reviews are essential to making safety part of a dealership shop's culture, Ayers says.

"If the focus is on speed, getting repair orders in and out," he says, "you're setting yourself up for problems." ■