

News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Unlocking the key to attracting talent to bodyshops

The bodyshop industry is struggling to attract skilled young people. Bart De Groof, Senior Global Marketing Director, Refinish, at Axalta, explains the challenges and what needs to be done to address them

14 November 2024 – The shortage of skilled labour in bodyshops, particularly refinishers, is a complex issue. Attracting talent to the industry requires alignment of several multifaceted points: it's an industry that has a historic reputation for being hands-on, manual, dirty and potentially dangerous; today's young people don't expect a job for life but rather will "test and taste" different careers; and refinishers and mechanics have little to no visibility with car owners so they may struggle to find a true sense of job satisfaction. Add to that, refinishers work in pressurised environments, striving always to work faster and to be more productive, yet they hold arguably the most responsibility for the repair as far as the car owner is concerned – how the car looks cosmetically when the job is finished. It can be construed as all risk with very little direct reward despite it being a very fulfilling and highly skilled job.

Highly technical, honourable job

In the UK, between 2014 and 2022, the percentage of 22- to 29-year-olds in professional and managerial jobs increased from 38% to 46%, while the percentage of those in higher working-class jobs, including skilled manual work, went down from 25% to 16%.¹

"This is a perfect reflection of one of the main problems facing bodyshops today across our region," says Bart De Groof, Senior Global Marketing Director, Refinish, at Axalta.

“Today, working with your hands is seen as a lower-skilled job. For many, the cachet comes from the place and not the job; the preference is often to work a lesser job in a more prestigious organisation than to have a highly-skilled manual job in a humble bodyshop. Refinishers in particular are true artisans who are solving a major problem in a person’s life. What the industry must get across to job seekers is that today’s modern bodyshops are more akin to high-tech laboratories. Bodyshops are no longer like the dirty, dangerous factories of old. This couldn’t be further from the truth, but sadly the perception lingers. Bodyshops have a bit of image crisis on their hands that we are working to help change.”

In order to attract young talent, bodyshops must shed this old image, clearly communicating how technologically advanced they are, because it is playing a part in job-seeking decision making. More than 80% of 12,000 Generation Z across 17 different countries revealed they aspire to work with cutting-edge technology and 91% state that technology would influence job choice².

“Bodyshops can’t simply wait for the talent to show up on their forecourt. They must proactively engage with the talent in a way that is appealing to them,” De Groof adds.

Technical innovation has seen the car paint repair process in particular become faster, easier and more profitable. Modern digital tools clearly send the digitisation and environmental sustainability messages that resonate with tech-savvy job seekers including Gen Z - the true digital natives. Advanced innovative developments such as Axalta Iru Scan, Axalta Iru Mix and Axalta Nimbus, the newly launched global customer experience platform for refinish customers, have contributed towards this shift for many bodyshops.

No longer a job for life

The time it takes to train to start a job in the industry is another possible barrier to entry for young talent. Culturally, younger generations no longer start a job, undergo lengthy training and stay for their entire career; the job for life concept no longer exists. In fact, recent generations have increasingly been starting their careers in low-paid occupations such as bar and wait staff, call centre workers and shop and kitchen assistants, despite their higher education levels³.

“The refinish industry should take heed of this trend and offer a much shorter training cycle to allow entry into our sector for a “taste and see” type experience, as this is how

the younger generations are testing out different career options. We also need to be prepared that they may stay for a while and then move to something else entirely, even if they are satisfied with the job. This diversity is simply part of their career path and not a negative reflection of our industry,” De Groof says.

The advent of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and gamified simulation training will help to attract a younger demographic by offering them training environments they might not have associated with the refinish industry.

True job satisfaction and a sense of purpose

The most substantial of the challenges that bodyshops face in attracting young talent is the fact they have no visibility with the car owner and therefore little true job satisfaction that may lead to feeling like the job has little sense of purpose.

De Groof explains, “When someone’s car goes into a bodyshop after an accident, the car owner is usually upset and can’t wait to get their car back; as far as they are concerned, this is all a big hassle they want solved as fast as possible. They deal with a customer service representative at the bodyshop usually and will almost never have any interaction with the refinisher, or anyone in the bodyshop itself.”

The refinisher is the one who does all the cosmetic work, however, and there will also be mechanics, amongst others, who do all the other repairs. These are the people solving the problem. None of those skilled technicians ever have any interaction with the customer. When the customer comes back and collects their car, a purchase which is usually second largest after their home, they will most likely be delighted to have their precious car back in one piece, looking great.

“Who gets all that praise and credit in that moment when the customer gets back to their normal life? The customer service representative; not the refinisher or the mechanic. There is a clear disconnect between the people who have done the work and people who are getting the credit for it. Everyone wants to be rewarded and validated in their job in real time. We all want to see the fruits of our labour being appreciated – we shouldn’t underestimate the power of that. We are used to immediate fulfilment today - we can order something online and it arrives within hours. Likewise, the younger generation must have quick job satisfaction and feel a real sense of purpose otherwise it is a big barrier for attracting and retaining them,” De Groof says.

Retaining talent

For bodyshops who are only just managing with the talent they have, or who are growing and struggling to cope, there are ways to address this shortfall in labour.

“There are many parts of the bodyshop, not just the refinishing, that require labour. The refinishing is highly technical and not everyone can do it, so the key here is to automate the tasks that don’t need a highly-trained refinisher to carry them out, and allow them to get on and do what they do best: paint. That’s where many of Axalta’s recent developments have come in, including our Axalta Iruş digital colour management process: Scan. Match. Mix. Anyone with minimal training can hold and operate the new Axalta Iruş Scan spectrophotometer. The same can be said for Axalta Nimbus, the colour match part of the three-step process. With Axalta Iruş Mix, the final step in the process, anyone can press the button and launch it to mix a formula it has received. The skilled refinishers can get on and work with our products, which is what they are trained to do, and, frankly, the paint job is what the customer will be looking at first,” De Groof says.

Retaining talent also requires continuous development, including training. Here too digitisation supports bodyshops. In Axalta Nimbus, refinishers can access short training videos at any time if they need a quick solution to a problem or just a short refresher. Axalta Nimbus also provides access to more in-depth online training modules, as well as live virtual training sessions and the ability to book onto in-person courses all via Axalta Academy.

Unlock the key

The challenges bodyshops as a whole, and the refinish industry more specifically, face when it comes to attracting young talent are numerous and highly complex but not insurmountable.

De Groof concludes, “At Axalta, we believe we have a responsibility to make bodyshops those innovative, technological workplaces that not only are ultra-productive but also are the place where job seekers want to be. We aim to shift perceptions and to help get the message across that these jobs are solving people’s problems, day in, day out. If bodyshops can then find a way for job recognition to flow back to the people who carried it out – to the refinishers and to the mechanics – together we will truly unlock the key to attracting young talent to bodyshops.”

For more information about Axalta Refinish, visit refinish.axalta.eu.

About Axalta Refinish

Axalta Refinish – part of Axalta, a global leader in the coatings industry – is a reliable global vehicle body repair partner for customers who demand nothing short of total satisfaction. We deliver innovative products, services, and technology that make the entire vehicle repair journey more efficient, sustainable, and profitable. With nearly 160 years of experience in the coatings industry, our dedication to innovation and our constantly developing technology means we offer our customers an unlimited colour choice for perfect colour matches. Most importantly, we work tirelessly to anticipate our customers' needs so they can address the challenges they face every day. We have a large portfolio of brands for every bodyshop requirement and every segment of the industry.

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