



The Star Training Academy in Flint opened earlier this month. A second location in Comstock Park is planned for early in 2019. **Courtesy Star Truck Rentals**

Star Truck aims to combat technician shortage

Truck leasing company offers five-week paid training for future diesel techs.

By [Ehren Wynder](#)
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Facing the looming threat of a skilled technician shortage, Grand Rapids-based Star Truck Rentals is taking the challenge head-on by offering paid training for future diesel technicians.

Star Truck launched its inaugural Star Training Academy on Oct. 15 at its Flint location, 1945 South Dort Hwy., and the company already plans to offer the same course at its location on 172 Lamoreaux Drive NE in Comstock Park early next year.

During the five-week Diesel Technician Basics training course, participants will become familiar with key subject matter areas, as identified by the American Trucking Association's Technology and Maintenance Council, including preventive maintenance inspection, electrical, brakes, diagnostics and emissions.

Star Truck President Tom Bylenga said the company has a personal interest in training more diesel technicians to maintain its future operations.

"We are not producing enough skilled workers in any field, and just as there's a dearth of truck drivers, there's a similar shortage with respect to truck technicians," Bylenga said.

He offered data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics claiming an estimated 140,000 or more diesel technicians would be needed by 2022 to fill new job openings and those vacated by the retiring generation.

Star Truck already is feeling the crunch. Bylenga said almost every vehicle in its fleet runs on diesel, minus a few lower mileage trucks that run on gas, and out of Star Truck's 17 locations in Michigan and Indiana, almost all of them are in need of diesel techs.

Even with continued advancements in alternative fuels, like propane and compressed natural gas for fleet vehicles — as previous Business Journal reports have noted — Bylenga predicted the majority of Star Truck's operations will utilize diesel systems into 2022.

To reach its goals, Star Trucks is offering applicants a learn-and-earn program. Students enrolled in the Star Academy will receive paid training at a rate of \$15 per hour toward acquiring skills as a diesel technician. Upon successful completion of the course, graduates will have job placement at one of Star's 17 locations.

“We’re not just training independent people. We’re hiring them,” Bylenga said. “We’re paying them for training.”

The need to train more diesel techs also is a shared effort that brought Star Trucks together with American Diesel Training Centers out of Ohio.

Star Trucks is replicating the same courses American Diesel runs out of its physical locations in Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio, via the company’s training materials.

Tim Spurlock, president of American Diesel, said Star Trucks reached out to his company first. After finding American Diesel in a transport topics article about technician shortages, Star Trucks contacted the company and asked if it had plans to expand into Grand Rapids.

“We said if you’re willing to look outside of the box, we’re willing to fix this problem,” Spurlock said.

Spurlock said Star Trucks is utilizing American Diesel’s entire system, beginning with finding people with the right basic attributes, like showing up on time and working well with others. Rather than hunt for skilled labor, the lack of which is threatening a number of industries, American Diesel has opted to tap into a much larger pipeline of “high-effort but low-skill, low-wage workers.”

“We don’t believe nobody wants to work these days,” Spurlock said. “The biggest barriers to them taking that next step are there are no options for them. They don’t have two years to give to a typical post-secondary education program, and they don’t have \$40,000 to \$50,000 to go to a technical school.”

Similar to American Diesel’s approach to finding talent in the high-effort, low-skill pipeline, Bylenga said Star Trucks is looking for candidates who already are motivated to start a career but don’t yet have the necessary training.

“We’re not going to the high schools,” Bylenga said. “The focus of (American Diesel) — and I think it makes sense — is to focus on young men who have bumped their heads around, and suddenly they’re married and they need a serious career.”

Bylenga added Star Truck’s five-week course only covers the basic level of diesel systems knowledge. Where Star Truck usually finds skilled workers who just graduated from a two-year technical school and already know how to do highly technical work, like overhauling an engine, its training academy will start its students out on the first level of training.

“They start doing preventive maintenance,” Bylenga said. “Most of us don’t overhaul engines anymore.”

Star Truck also is the first test case for American Diesel to figure out if the company could make what it does in Ohio work at somebody else’s location, Spurlock said. Aside from providing the training tools for Star Truck to launch its own school, American Diesel also developed a social media marketing campaign specifically for Star Truck’s training academy.

“Basically, the campaign was you can have a fantastic career as a diesel mechanic, and we’re going to pay for you to go through that training,” Spurlock said.

Three weeks after the campaign launched, Star Truck had 74 applicants, 13 of which it hired for the initial training program, which was good news for Bylenga, who said he was hoping for at least eight.

Beyond outfitting them with the curriculum and the marketing, Spurlock said the rest was all Star Truck’s initiative. The company converted its own 4,000-square-foot, underused warehouse space at its Flint location into a training bay.

“It just worked out perfectly because they were willing to attack the problem head-on,” Spurlock said.

He added the willingness to face the problem directly is what’s going to keep companies afloat as the labor pool becomes increasingly shallower. By 2025, the labor shortage for diesel techs will have increased to about 400,000, he predicted.

“The problem is a decent-sized diesel program for a community college will be lucky to graduate 10 students a year,” Spurlock said, “and there are only roughly 173 in the U.S.”

But in spite of this stark outlook, Spurlock said he was 100 percent confident American Diesel, along with Star Truck and its other training partners, can solve this problem.

“They have to commit, and they have to spend resources on it,” he said. “The wave is hitting, and for most companies, it’s too late.”

With the Flint training academy scheduled to wrap up around November or December, Bylenga expected Star Truck to get rolling on offering the same classes in Comstock Park in January 2019.

Those interested in applying for January classes can find the application at steelforestusa.com/private.



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