


SHOP OPERATIONS







If technicians are truly a shop's most valuable asset, maintaining their physical and mental health should be a top priority.

By John Hitch

## [ HEALTH & WELLNESS ]

**P**atrick Walton can work on anything that rolls into the 26-bay Texas dealership where he's worked for 24 years. The senior master technician has picked up plenty of certifications over his 30-year career, including school buses, electric vehicles, and CNG engines. He also picked up plenty of bad habits.

In his younger, more carefree days, it wasn't unusual to wrench on cars and trucks for 12 or more hours then head to the bar and close it down, then come back at 6:30 a.m. and do it again.

"My Lord, those were some very unhealthy years," the 48-year-old recalled with a laugh.

Even as he scaled back on the late nights, he'd still fill his mornings with empty calories, something to which many other shop technicians can relate. "We're doing two or three Monsters or other energy drinks during the day, and candy bars, chips, and cookies out of the snack machine," he said. "Instead of packing your lunch, you're off to the pizza buffet."

Like an engine, a technician needs fuel to keep up in the fast-paced environment and the sugar-rich fuel often put in their tanks can provide a quick burst of energy.

"It's always about getting that job completed, getting it returned to the customer, making that money, and moving on to the next," Walton noted.

That productivity comes at a cost. Using junk food as fuel and working so long you have little time and energy to maintain your body is like constantly running an engine with contaminated oil and clogged filters. After a while, this strategy has a catastrophic impact on the engine. For



humans, at worst this means death, and at best, it leads to a serious decline in quality of life.

"I don't know about anybody else, but I'm spent by Saturday afternoon—I'd really prefer not to move a whole lot," Walton noted.

The husband and father already missed a lot of his kids' growing up due to all those long hours to support them, so this was untenable. A few years ago, he took a step back and decided to make some changes. Walton starts his day with a quarter-mile walk on the treadmill. (He can't run due to a titanium femur he got after a car crash as a teenager.)

Instead of energy drinks he drinks water and Gatorade. For breakfast, he now eats fresh-made kolaches, essentially sausage pastries, but at least not "soaked in sugar" like fast food options, Walton reasoned. He also packs his lunch instead of heading to the pizza buffet. These small changes might not seem like much, but Walton said he likes how he feels more and that helps at work and home.

"Making that commitment to having a balance really has made a difference in how I handle my day," said Walton, who noted the dealership's owner "is a healthy person" who provides the crew and customers with bottled water and nutritious snacks in the break area, in addition to the sugary soft drinks and junk food.

A technician's health, both physical and mental, ultimately comes down to their personal choices and actions. You can lead a man to kale, but you can't make him eat it. But middle and upper management have no less responsibility to provide technicians with the tools they need to maintain a healthy body and mind as they do to boost their shop productivity and efficiency.

"While I think each person is responsible for their own mental health and personal boundaries, there is research that says managers who care about their employees, provide work-life balance, and create an environment where employees can be themselves create a more productive workforce," noted Ali John, sr. manager of culture, wellness, and community engagement for Werner Enterprises. "If employees feel respected and cared for, they are more productive and they want to perform high-quality work."

That research included a 2021 study published in *The Journal of Cardiovascular Research* that found policies to improve work-life balance and employee well-being led to improved focus, creativity, motivation, retention of top talent, and better mental and physical health.

The responses from the technicians, managers, and health experts working closely with the industry we spoke to indicate that's not happening as much as it should be. Paradoxically, they say leaders who chase cost savings and uptime at the expense of techs' health likely reduce productivity and increase expenses and downtime. Conversely, helping techs achieve their health and wellness



» Patrick Walton returned to work right after getting this injury treated. It's an ugly reminder that shops often value uptime over health.

Photo courtesy of Patrick Walton



» Werner has gym facilities to allow all employees a space to stay healthy and encourages technicians to do morning warm-up stretches to avoid injuries.

Werner Enterprises

goals could be the panacea for several shop challenges, such as retention and high worker's compensation claims. So let's talk about how to make the shop a healthier place overall.

## Shop work till you drop

With fleet sizes growing and technology advancing, while too few new techs are joining the trade and too many leaving due to retirement or burn-out, the skeleton crews left behind are worked to the bone, with work-life balance an afterthought.

"As a service technician, it's really hard to get the permission to step away, for [management] to understand you need to step away, or that you need a day to recuperate or a mental break," offered Walton, who said his dealership does have enough people. Ingrained in him, though, is a desire to put the shop before his own well-being. Last year, the master tech lost a fingertip in a driveshaft U-joint when the component slipped. After the gruesome accident, he got patched up at the hospital and came back to finish his shift.

No one told him he had to, Walton noted. They didn't have to. So many managers previously made clear he was "lucky to have a job" and there was a "folder full of people just fighting to get in here." That leaves an impression. And to earn a raise, he was told to just work faster and bill more hours. To bill more, you have to work more, which means working through injuries, illness, and exhaustion.

As a senior employee, Walton does get personal time off but often sells those days back to make some extra cash. For many, sacrificing days off—and putting in more overtime—are done to triage the current economic crisis. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator, the dollar went 23% further in June 2019 than in June 2024.

"They could be working hard to have more skills and still be making less money," noted Joshua Taylor, an Ontario, Canada-based mechanics coach and host of the Wrench Turners podcast.

A former flat rate tech throughout the 2000s who went on to become a service advisor and collision shop general manager before getting into

**"You wouldn't wait for a check engine or oil light to come on to go change your oil or make sure that your trucks are up to speed, but that's exactly what a lot of these companies are doing... they're waiting for something bad to happen."**

Dr. Mark Manera, founder and CEO, Offshift

consulting and writing, Taylor has seen several facets of the vehicle repair industry, and the one constant in any economy is technicians' drive for money at the expense of personal time.

When he was starting out, Taylor would leave his job at a dealership to moonlight four nights a week in the shop owned by his friend's dad. And now, as a career coach for technicians, he said "99% of the time, people were not really asking for coaching, they were asking how to make more money."

For the first few years of their career, Taylor noted techs "have to carry an innumerable amount of debt," which includes up to \$15,000 in student debt from a vocational school and whatever tools they need to buy. If they start a family, there will never be enough money coming in.

Meanwhile, Taylor noted the fast food chain near his house is offering \$18/hr (USD) on its marquee, while a nearby dealership's marquee advertises a \$13/hr starting wage. "I'm sorry, you're not going to get a 19-year-old in the building to start being a mechanic," Taylor asserted.

He's also seen shop employment listings offering a great work/life balance, the definition of which is 55 hours per week. "You can't spend time with your family, live life, and work 55 hours a week—you just can't," Taylor said.

On the plus side, a Wrench Turner wellness survey found while starting auto dealer techs make around \$40,000/year, within three years they could jump to Level 3 and make nearly \$90,000. And with good bay mates, supportive leadership, and the ability to receive OEM training, “it is possibly the most rewarding career you can have,” Taylor said.

## Routine health maintenance

Of course, fleets and shops have to consider uptime and revenue, and the work has to be done or the country couldn’t operate. With fewer techs out there, they have to work more hours. The question is, what cost is the tech’s body paying?

“When you work long hours, that means there’s less time outside of work for your family and also for your health,” said Dr. Mark Manera, a physical therapist who founded Offshift, a health app for transportation industry workers. The Offshift CEO started the company after a glut of unhealthy truckers came into his clinic. After some research, he found these drivers’ life expectancy is 16 years lower than the U.S. average. “It’s very clear to me that the trucking industry as a whole has robbed a lot of these people of their health,” he said.

Offshift seeks to undo that by connecting users to wellness coaches and helping them navigate the healthcare system. Most insurance plans, he noted, are not tailored for drivers, techs, and warehouse workers. “They’re built for someone who works in a cubicle and handed to an industrial worker as an afterthought,” Manera said. This causes communication problems between providers and workers and leads to less engagement.

“Honestly, these health benefits are collecting more dust throughout the year than actual usage,” he continued, adding that 50% of truckers don’t have a primary care doctor, which Offshift helps them find.

And many don’t even have time to get routine preventive maintenance checkups and end up ignoring a severe medical issue. “They’re living with it until it’s too late, and they end up in the ER after a major medical emergency, or they die early,” Manera said.

This is where it becomes clear the “paradox” around uptime might be blatant hypocrisy. Fleet leaders are taught the danger of ignoring routine maintenance and inspections.

“You wouldn’t wait for a check engine or oil light to come on to go change your oil or make sure that your trucks are up to speed,” Manera said. “But that’s exactly what a lot of these companies are doing for their people—they’re waiting for something bad to happen.”

And this is being done with shops and fleets’ most valuable assets: their drivers and techs. Failing to address their issues, as often with engines, leads to even more expensive and time-consuming repairs. With techs, a lack of routine health maintenance can lead to writing out a much higher worker’s compensation check.

“The average worker’s comp claim costs just over \$41,000 per year,” Manera said. “The more severe ones get up to \$100,000+. But about a third of musculoskeletal issues can be prevented if we can get these people to be physically active on a consistent basis.”



## Liquid diet plan

In the shop, you don’t even have to take a sip of alcohol to develop a seriously unhealthy drinking problem. This problem comes down to two things: staying hydrated and consuming empty calories.

“As a technician working in those hot shops, you do get dehydrated,” noted Bob Perry, a transportation health consultant and founder of FitDrivers.com, a site that helps truckers qualify for DOT medical cards. Perry warned that keeping hydrated is a day-long PM: “Don’t let your battery run all the way down before you decide to fill it back up.”

He noted electrolytes are also important, but instead of a sports drink like Gatorade, you can pour electrolyte powder into a water bottle to avoid the sugar. Water in general is best, he said, and can also quell feelings of hunger and disorientation.

In most shops, water is relegated to a few bottom slots of the vending machine. “The rest of the thing is filled with high-sugar drinks, power drinks, that kind of thing,” he noted. That’s why he recommends shops offer free water for employees and drivers.

And while sugary energy drinks may seem like a good way to jump start the day, they can lead to unintended weight gain.

“Stop sipping your calories,” advised Werner Enterprises’ Ali John.

One 24-oz. Monster energy drink has 286 calories and 27 grams each of carbs and sugar. A 12-oz. Red Bull has 155 calories, 37 g of sugar, and 40 g of carbs. She said to hydrate instead with low- or no-sugar beverages. Both Monster and Red Bull have sugar-free versions, with the latter adding two new 15-calorie flavors: Watermelon and Strawberry Apricot. Another popular energy drink, Celsius, is low on calories but has 200 mg of caffeine. With caffeine as a diuretic (causing more trips to the restroom), and working in a hot shop, this can hasten dehydration, this makes drinking water essential in the shop.



Manera said connecting workers with coaches to go over habits and behaviors serves as a predictive maintenance tool to mitigate impending injuries. “[At Offshift,] we create a custom health plan for them that’s focused on preventative care, so it’s helping them get ahead of musculoskeletal injuries,” Manera said.

Manera said while truckers may face morbid obesity due to sitting in the driver’s seat most of the day, many techs are merely overweight.

“Technicians struggle with some similar health challenges as professional drivers, just maybe at a less common rate,” Werner’s John said. “They may also experience overuse injuries from repet-

itive movements and have a higher prevalence of muscle strains.”

These are more common due to the repetitive nature of fastening and unfastening bolts and overhead work while the vehicle is on a lift. This leads to achy shoulders and backs that could develop into something more serious. John said Werner employs a stretching program for techs to warm up at the start of shifts to limit preventable injuries.

Bryan Self, former fleet manager for Florida-based Raven Transport, would post JJ Keller-provided instructions on the bulletin board about how to perform two-minute stretches to prevent strains. He also recommended reviewing the previous year’s worker’s comp claims and tailoring changes to mitigate prevalent issues.

“Those are things you want to show that you can avoid, which is now a cost saving,” Self said, while noting that the prospect of saving money always motivates corporate action.

This is more important as the aging workforce, now at an average age of 42, according to Zippia, has seen so much action.

“Everybody’s on medication for high blood pressure and has knee and back issues—all that stuff that coincides with wear and tear on your body,” Self said.

With coaching that leads to better health choices and more activity, Offshift users are seeing a difference, Manera asserted. Coaches help employees find calorie-cutting alternatives, as opposed to “30-day diet challenges,” which Manera said are unsustainable and “set you up to fail day one.” Instead of only a Monster energy drink for breakfast, add some protein and fruit to fuel the workday.

He pointed to one tech who recently dipped below 200 lbs. after being above 220 lbs.

“They’re decreasing their pain, they’re increasing some mobility, and they’re losing that 15 to 20 lbs.,” he said. “And they’re having a lot more energy. That is life-changing on a day-to-day basis.”

He added that when one employee shows visible gains from a healthier lifestyle, that word-of-mouth inspires others to follow suit.

## Costs of ignoring mental health

A person’s health struggles can’t always be measured on a scale or fixed with a meal plan. The needs of the job, combined with an off-kilter work-life balance, can manifest in less obvious but equally damaging ways. These include stress and anxiety, which then can lead to addiction and suicide.

“Mental health is just not talked about,” Taylor sighed. “It’s a very short road from dark to very dark. And unfortunately, it’s a disastrous road.”

Taylor started his podcast after seeing how serious a problem suicide was in vehicle repair. According to 2021 Center for Disease Control stats, the occupational average is 32 suicides per 100,000 for males. Automotive service techs/mechanics have a rate of 80.6, while bus/truck/diesel techs are at 40.1.

Taylor offered that auto techs go into the job expecting to work on “fast cars and all the new stuff,” while the reality is doing oil changes all day and working on the same type of car, while the supervisor harangues: “Is it done? Is it done?”

A 2010 study called “Depress Anxiety” found that



70% of those who attempt suicide suffered from an anxiety disorder such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And along with the threat of suicide, anxiety and depression cost the workplace in productivity. A 2020 Lancet study found “anxiety and depression costs the global economy \$1 trillion each year in lost productivity.”

“Anxiety is the basis on which many of the negative emotions come from—stress, depression, suicidal ideation, and things of that nature,” Taylor said. “The more anxiety you can remove from a mechanic’s day, the more successful they’re gonna be.”

Taylor also noted how anxiety can lead to addiction as a coping mechanism. This is not limited to drugs and alcohol, but also food and video games.

Despite all the complex and grim stats, Taylor’s experience leads him to believe there’s a simple fix to mitigate techs’ anxiety.

“Just talk to them,” he bluntly stated. “Ask them what they need to be successful.”

According to recent WrenchWay polling data of auto and diesel techs, while 30% of techs meet with their managers weekly, another 30% never do. The most concerning stat is that only one in five would recommend the industry to a friend.

Stress, anxiety, and depression can then take root from feeling powerless and constantly micro-managed. Taylor acknowledged shops can’t accommodate techs’ requests to reduce stress, as they may run counter to business goals and company values.

“I’m not asking anybody to do that,” he offered. “I’m asking you to have a conversation with all of your team and understand what their needs are.”

Self also believes in speaking with techs face-to-face. He’s still settling into his new role as director of fleet for Florida East Coast Rail, so it will take some time before he’s able to chat with all 110 techs across the eight locations. He plans to ask them what’s missing or lacking in the shop and what works best.

He’ll also watch people’s habits, learn how they work, and how the overall structure functions, keeping detailed notes on a spreadsheet. Self then plans to combine the insights together and enact changes he surmises will provide the most impact.

This is done methodically, as he learned long ago not to make changes too rashly.

“First, sit back, see how everything operates, then slowly implement things,” Self said. “They seem

to stick better that way.” He also noted that managers are the driving force of change, so they “have to be consistent with that change,” making sure they stay intact and everyone is on board.

This will likely include ensuring water and healthy snacks are abundant, muscles are properly stretched, and the health plan caters to techs’ needs. It will still be up to the employees to take control of their health, but at least they won’t feel

powerless or under-supported.

“You’re never going to please 100% of the people, but every little step that you do towards the people you work with makes a difference,” Self concluded. “It makes them happier to come to work. It all kind of ties together.” ■

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