

# Soft-Skills Workbook for Auto Techs



By Sandra J. Ellingsen

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my beloved brother David, and his efforts to help fellow automotive technicians enjoy a rewarding and prosperous career.

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## Introduction

An automotive technician, in order to succeed, must have technical as well as non-technical skills. This book is focused on the non-technical skills, sometimes called soft skills or employability skills. Topics include ethics, customer service, efficiency and much more. The book also covers information about what to expect in the workplace, for example, the different pay systems, types of shops, and safety.

The workbook format enables a student to read a section and answer questions to reinforce the concepts. Exercises and role-play drills further enhance learning and skill building. Interviews from managers and techs working in different kinds of shops give the student insight into what is expected of a tech in today's industry.

Instructors will find the workbook a simple way to cover all the topics listed in the NATEF employability skills guidelines required for its automotive program to maintain certification.

English departments are able to use the workbook topics and exercises for journaling or essay writing, or to assist the instructor and students to meet Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, and/or literacy of technical subjects.

The reason a person gets into the field of auto repair, can be a strong factor in his success: a love of cars, enjoyment and satisfaction in taking apart things, fixing them and putting them back together, a love of racing or antique vehicles. Maybe it was something you shared with your dad growing up. All these motives are a good start towards a rewarding career. Add to that, some good technical training, and some non-technical skill building and you are on your way.

This book will help you with the non-technical skill building, as well as leading you to a more thorough understanding of what you are getting into, so you can mold your career to fit your goals and lifestyle.

While mainly written for student techs, this book can inspire a young tech in her early career or help a more advanced tech, get past a roadblock or difficult situation.

# Chapter 1: Personal Standards

Dress Code, Cleanliness/Personal Hygiene, Manners, Language, Smoking

Basic personal standards required for any job include looking neat and acting appropriately. Some employers have a dress code with specific do's and don'ts that must be followed. Many auto repair shops require uniforms, and these are provided by the employer.

Cleanliness and good personal hygiene are a must. Even though you are working on dirty, greasy car parts all day, doesn't mean you can't shower before work, clean under your fingernails, put on deodorant, and wear clean clothes. It is also important to stay clean enough during the workday so you don't leave dirt or grease on your customer's vehicles. Wipe your hands often, and use fender covers and floor mats.

Good manners and clean language are always smart choices. Good manners includes being courteous, respectful, listening carefully, and showing your appreciation.

Smoking is unsafe anywhere near an auto shop. There are many flammable chemicals, fumes, oily rags, etc. Cigarette smoke is also repulsive to a high percent of the population, and it is not considered good manners or professional to smoke in front of customers. Another problem with smoking is the time it takes. If you are getting paid a flat rate based on the jobs you complete, 20 to 30 minutes a day worth of smoke breaks adds up. This is time you are not getting paid for. Employers hate this too. They would rather have an employee in his bay doing his work. If you get paid hourly, your boss will not want to see you wasting time taking smoke breaks when you should be working.

1. What is the dress code in your classroom or place of work?
2. Describe the general cleanliness of your classmates or coworkers, and yourself. Do you personally need to improve anything?
3. How will high personal standards contribute to your success in the automotive field?
4. Do role-play Scenario 1—Manners.
5. Spend the day saying “please”, “thank you”, and “excuse me” (or “pardon me”) to your fellow shop-mates or school-mates. Continue this at home, or anywhere else you go during the day. Write down what happened and how you felt. (If you found this difficult or awkward, try practicing with a friend. I also recommend practicing this every day until it becomes second nature.)

6. Pair up. Take a picture of your partner's tool box and work area. Take a full length picture of your partner. Look at your pictures of each other and your work areas. Write down how you think a customer's first impression would be. Write down any things you think you can improve about yourself or your work area.
7. Put a swear jar in the shop. After a week, answer this question. Did this make you more aware of any bad language you were using? Did it help a fellow shop-mate?



## Chapter 2: Employment Eligibility

No Criminal Record, Background Check, Clean Driving Record, Drug/Alcohol-Free, Good Credit

You have studied very hard, and learned some serious car repair skills. When it comes time for you to get a job, you don't want to fail any initial employment eligibility requirements. A criminal record can be tough to overcome, so you clearly want to avoid that. Different shops have different policies on this, and some will not consider hiring you. Background checks are sometimes required, so lying on your employment application won't help.

A clean driving record is necessary, since you will be driving other people's cars on test drives, and the shop insurance won't allow hires with a DUI. Many employers require drug tests before and sometimes during employment. (Drugs aren't good for you anyway.) Sure, you may have a beer now and then, but I recommend not drinking the night before an interview or a workday. And especially never drink and drive, obviously because it's dangerous, and also because a DUI can prevent you from getting the great job you want.

Lately, a good credit record has become something employers may check before hiring someone. They are looking to see if you are responsible with your finances as an indicator that you are a responsible person. As a young student, you may not have much on your credit record, but as long as there is nothing negative, you should be fine. A bad credit record can always be fixed.

1. If you were to have an interview tomorrow, would you pass the above criteria? A "yes" or "no" answer is fine. If you answered "no", you may want to discuss your situation with someone.
2. Request a copy of your credit report. (Note: your credit *score* is something different. That can cost \$1 or more, and is not necessary. Institutions like banks use that for evaluating your ability to pay back loans.) Go to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) where you can request free credit reports from the three top credit report companies, namely, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. If you do not go through this website, you may have to pay something for the report. I recommend getting all three reports (For this exercise you only need one report.) and checking the information on each. (When I did this several years ago, I found an error on one of the reports, and I had to contact them to correct it.) Comment on what you found.

## Chapter 3: Personal Ethics

Honesty, Integrity, Reliability, Respect

Your personal ethics are how you behave in the world. It includes things like honesty, integrity, reliability, and respectfulness to name a few. It is how you treat others and how you treat yourself. You won't necessarily behave perfectly every moment of every day, but always strive to do your best. The more positive qualities you have and develop in your lifetime, the happier and more successful you will be.

Appendix B: Positive Character Traits has more information and a practical exercise on improving personal qualities that you feel need a bit of work.

1. Read Appendix B: Positive Character Traits. Select one trait you want to improve. Spend one week working on improving it. Write down what happened.

Definition: Honesty – the quality of being truthful and trustworthy; refusing to lie, cheat, or steal.

2. Write the definition of honesty in your own words.
3. Describe a time you were honest. What was the result?
4. Describe a time you or someone you know was dishonest. What was the result?

Definition: Integrity – the quality of being true to one's moral beliefs even when it would be easier to ignore them.

5. Write the definition of integrity in your own words.
6. Describe a time you exhibited integrity. What was the result?
7. Describe a time you or someone you know showed a poor sense of integrity. What was the result?

Definition: Reliability – the quality of being able to be trusted; being dependable.

8. Write the definition of reliability in your own words.
9. Describe a time you were reliable. What was the result?
10. Describe a time you or someone you know was unreliable. What was the result?

Definition: Respect – concern, consideration, politeness.

11. Write the definition of respect in your own words.
12. Describe a time you were respectful. What was the result?
13. Describe a time you or someone you know was disrespectful. What was the result?
14. How will high personal ethics contribute to your success in the automotive field?

## Chapter 4: Workplace Ethics

Workplace Policies/Employment Laws, Being On Time, Following Directions, Meetings, Flexibility, Professionalism

Workplace ethics are your basic actions in the workplace that are expected of a good employee. Study and follow workplace policies and employment laws so you know what you can and cannot do. Be on time every day. Follow directions. Be flexible when things change; for example, when you get a new boss or when you are suddenly required to work late every Friday. Be professional at all times. During meetings always be attentive and listen to what is being said. During some meetings there may be times appropriate for asking questions or contributing ideas.

1. List three workplace policies at your place of business or school.
2. When was the last time you were late and how did this affect you or others?
3. Why should you be on time as an auto tech?
4. Make up an example of how not following directions can result in someone being harmed.
5. Make up an example of how not following directions can result in someone being fired.

Definition: Flexibility – the quality of being able to change easily and adapt to different conditions and circumstances as they occur. (Used here as a mental ability, and not referring to your skills at yoga.)

6. Write the definition of flexibility in your own words.
7. Describe a time you were able to act flexibly in an unexpected situation. What was the result?
8. Describe a time you or someone you know was inflexible. What was the result?
9. Spend the next 24 hours practicing being flexible to everything unexpected or unpleasant, however small. Write down your experiences.

Definition: Professionalism – acting with a combination of skill and high moral standards; refraining from acting ill-mannered.

10. Write the definition of professionalism in your own words.
11. Name at least two people you know or know of, who act with professionalism.
12. Describe a time you showed professionalism. What was the result?
13. Describe a time you or someone you know was unprofessional or ill-mannered. What was the result? How did you feel about this person because of this?

14. Over the next three days, observe the level of professionalism exhibited by various people you encounter. Describe the least professional person you ran across, and the most professional one.
15. How will high workplace ethics contribute to your success in the automotive field?

## Chapter 9: Communication – Verbal

People in the Workplace, Relationships, Politeness/Respect, Professionalism, Gossip, Destructive Personalities

Verbal communication is critical to everyone. As an auto repair technician you will need to communicate with many people in the workplace including your boss, other managers and possibly the owner of your shop. You will need to talk with fellow techs and other coworkers, as well as customers and possibly others like vendors. See the chapter on people in the workplace for more details on the responsibilities of the other people in the shop.

You will develop relationships with these people, and you want to treat everyone with politeness and respect, maintaining professionalism at all times. Apply your personal ethics, your strong work ethic, teamwork, and your customer service skills.

If you think you are shy, not good with people, or not a “people person”, don’t worry. You can develop these skills as you move along in your career. You can join a public speaking club like *Toastmasters International*, or read books and practice conversations with friends and strangers. My favorite book, that has made a big difference in my life is called, *How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends*, by Don Gabor.

My brother made a point of practicing his verbal communication skills every chance he got. He would usually make a phone call instead of emailing, and when out in public he would say “hi” to people or start conversations. I noticed when I spent time with him, he would ask me questions about my life. His interest in others and his ability to communicate this, was one of the reasons he had so many good friends and was so well liked.

1. Why are good verbal communication skills required for a successful career in an auto shop?
2. Do role-play Scenario 7—How to Start a Conversation.

Gossip and negative conversations can be destructive to the work environment. They can create bad feelings between employees and disrupt the smooth efficient flow of work and communications. Destructive personalities can create trouble too. Some types of destructive personalities include the bully, the meddler, the gossip, the show-off/bragger, the procrastinator, the pessimist, the slug, and the drama king or drama queen. Some people will exhibit these destructive personality traits all the time, while others may just be having a momentary weakness or bad day.

Don't take any of this personally. Learn to ward off gossip by politely telling the person you are not interested, you are not the right person to be talking to about the topic, you are right in the middle of something and need to concentrate, or by suggesting they tell the boss, and maybe he can help. Then get on with your work. These suggestions were from *The Auto Tech's Handbook*. My favorite technique is to focus intently on what I am doing, and pretend I didn't hear the gossip. If it is someone with a momentary problem, maybe suggest you will talk with them at lunch or after work, or give them encouragement to focus on work to get through it. Be a positive influence; you will be respected for it. How you respond to specific situations, certainly depends on the relationship you have with the person, and the particular situation. The bottom line is to not let these things interfere with your work, and still maintain professionalism.

If there is someone in the office with a destructive personality like a bully, procrastinator, slug or drama king, chances are your boss is aware of it too. Some of these people won't last in a flat-rate pay environment, because they will not produce enough, or their work won't be up to quality standards. In most cases, let management worry about these people. If they are interfering with you getting your work done, a private discussion with the boss may be in order. Don't be too eager to label and accuse people. Sometimes we see the faults in others because we also have them.

If you are the one who unintentionally created tension or bad feelings with someone at the shop, you need to fix it. Talk with the person. Listen and communicate carefully. Include your manager in the discussion if you need help.

3. Describe someone you know or have known who has some of the qualities of a destructive personality. If you had to work in a shop with this person, how could you handle the situation?
4. Write down any insights you had about your own personality that you might want to consider changing.
5. Do role-play Scenario 8—Handling Gossip.
6. Do role-play Scenario 9—Negotiating Solutions to Workplace Conflicts.
7. Describe a time you had to make a conscious effort to listen and communicate carefully with someone in order to fix some bad feelings between you and this person.

## Scenario 3—Handling an Upset Customer

**Purpose of the drill:** To improve the student’s ability to communicate comfortably with customers; to become better at handling the customer’s complaints in a business-like and professional manner, without becoming upset, hostile, or argumentative in response, and without being caught at a loss for what to say or do next.

**Setup:** One student acts as the auto tech (or service manager) while the other acts as a customer who is unsatisfied or upset about a repair, for example, a customer returning to the shop after having taken the car home and discovering something was wrong.

**End result of the drill:** The tech should feel more comfortable with the scenario, and more certain of his ability to handle the customer in a smooth and professional manner.

**Procedure:** The person acting as the customer makes up a situation in which he is unhappy about some work the tech had done, and has brought the car back to the shop to complain. The tech should listen carefully to the customer to make sure he fully understands what the customer is saying (even if the customer is clearly wrong).

After listening carefully, the tech may employ any of various methods for dealing with the customer. For example, begin with expanded discussion, clarifications, and explanations, and at some point the tech should express or demonstrate having heard and understood what the customer has said. The tech might then offer to take the customer along on a test drive to further identify and discuss the problem. The tech could ask the customer to wait a moment while he checks with the service manager, after which the tech comes back with further data and possibly a solution. The tech should practice giving the customer clear, easy-to-understand explanations of what went wrong, and why. Emphasis should be placed on seeing that the tech is communicating truthfully, avoiding excuses, and is showing the customer that the shop stands behind its work and is willing to make things right. At some point the customer will show signs of feeling better about the situation, signifying the end of this scenario.

## Appendix C: Independent Shops

### Interview at DeYoung's Automotive

DeYoung's Automotive has been family owned since 1953. All of its technicians are ASE certified. The independent shop currently supports 7 to 8 full-time service techs.

They usually don't hire directly out of trade school. When they are looking for a new employee they interview the prospect, ask for references, and require a driver's license. Because they are an independent shop, they are able to consider people with a criminal record.

The procedure in their shop, is the service writer writes up the repair order and gives it to the tech. The tech does the rest. The tech looks at the car and performs any needed diagnosis. Then he discusses options and pricing with the customer. He is also responsible for calling the customer when the vehicle is ready. By requiring the tech to follow through the entire process with the customer, he builds confidence in selling the job, and it makes the experience more personal for the customer. Because they spend this extra time handling customers, they only pull about 6 to 7 flat-rate hours a day, but their flat-rate pay rate is higher than, say a dealership where the techs don't interact with the customers. These experienced techs work hard, sometimes working early or late. They provide great customer service, and as a result they pull in a nice paycheck.

John Mundy is one of these techs. He has been in the automotive business since 1978 and at DeYoung's for the last 14 years. He had two years of auto shop in high school, then had a job pumping gas and helping his boss with some minor auto repairs. He bought a car that needed an engine and put one in, giving him confidence to do more. He later attended Los Angeles Pierce College and received a 2-year automotive technician degree. After this, he continued to learn on the job. Today he is an ASE certified master technician. When asked why he likes fixing cars, he replied, "Because I can. I am good at it."

He likes the somewhat informal environment of DeYoung's, and even though he was in the middle of a busy day, he was kind enough to spend some time answering my questions.

John feels the most important qualities a tech needs are being on time, doing the work right the first time, working with minimal complaining (whiners don't last), working well with others, has his own tools, and is good with customers. DeYoung's has been around a long time and they get repeat business, so customer service is very important. Their goal is to make sure the customer is happy.



John has lots of good advice for young techs. He recommends finding someone at the shop to take you under his wing. (He says offering beer usually helps.) Also, you must be dedicated, or you won't last. He states that book savvy is not the most important thing. Everyone learns the most while on the job, so hard work, dedication, and working well with others are the keys to success. He further recommends wearing gloves in the shop, otherwise you will need a two week vacation to Hawaii to get all the grease off your hands! Both he and another tech told me how important it is to communicate properly, not get frustrated with customers, and ask customers and other techs lots and lots of questions.

When asked for further advice John says laughingly, "Don't become a tech." He further explains that what he means is these days there is more pressure to fix cars right away for customers who want to wait at the shop. Years ago, it was standard to keep a car for 3 days. He also says you must be prepared to learn a huge amount of information on repair, computer technology, and electrical diagnosis, and you must keep up on the newest vehicle technology.

Another bit of advice from John is to become diverse in your interests. Broaden your knowledge and expertise beyond just mechanics. John has taken his own advice, and has become a skilled welder and fabricator.

The shop has a couple of policies about tools. "You can only borrow a tool once. After that you have to buy it." And, "If you don't have the tool for the job, the job will go to the tech that does." John and the other techs have a lot of money invested in tools. They say Snap-On is the best quality. They recommend to start with cheaper tools like Craftsman and Harbor Freight, then buy more expensive ones later.

We spent a few minutes discussing side work. It was okay to work on friend's cars, but if you steal a customer to do side work, you will get fired. If you work on a friend's car at home and there is a problem, they may come to your place of business to bother you. John recommends bringing them into the shop, and giving them a discount on the labor. That way the customer is covered with a warranty and you are not liable if something goes wrong.

And on a final note, John showed me something they have on their computer that relates to car repair and customer service. It is called, “The Triangle”. The description says: *The Triangle. It consists of three things. The customer is allowed to choose only two.*

