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**Soft-Skills Workbook**

**for Auto Techs**

**By Sandra J. Ellingsen**

**SAMPLE OF WEB FORMAT**

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 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.

1. Write the definition of honesty in your own words.
2. Describe a time you were honest. What was the result?
3. 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.

1. Write the definition of integrity in your own words.
2. Describe a time you exhibited integrity. What was the result?
3. 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.

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

Definition: Respect – concern, consideration, politeness.

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

# Appendix A: Role-Plays

**General Role-Playing Instructions**

The following exercises are intended to increase the student’s willingness and ability to communicate with customers and other people under various conditions, and improve their efficiency and diagnostic skills. The exercises are performed by having students working in pairs, role-playing one or more pre-defined scenarios. Each exercise is run in both directions, with one student acting as the auto tech and the other as the customer (or other role), until a satisfactory result is achieved, and then the roles are reversed. On any particular exercise, the same pattern can be repeated at increasing levels of difficulty. A third person is optionally involved to supervise or monitor the work. This option is best employed after two students have worked only with each other for some time and feel they are now ready to demonstrate having achieved the goal of the exercise.

**End Result of each Drill**

By the end of each session of drilling, the tech should feel more comfortable with the scenario being presented and more certain of his or her ability to handle the customer or situation in a smooth and professional manner, gather the required data, or perform the required task or diagnosis.

**Exercise Participants**

The person acting as the customer (or other role) does not always need to be another student. He or she could instead be a friend, relative, instructor, classroom assistant, and so on, just so long as the person acting as the customer presents realistic comments, questions, and situations that various auto repair customers might present. Role-players should avoid far-fetched or rarely encountered scenarios. The situations presented should be things that would typically occur in an actual repair shop.

 When the students working on an exercise run into a confusion or problem that won’t resolve easily by just continuing the work, they should ask for assistance from the instructor. The instructor in this case would first try to get the students to work out the solution on their own by giving them only enough guidance to break through the momentary barrier, and no more.

**Role Reversal**

After the drill is complete, the students now reverse roles and repeat the exercise. To keep the workload balanced, these role reversals should occur regularly. That is, do not have one person being the tech for an entire, lengthy session. Plan to switch roles at a good resting point, such as just after the tech has gotten noticeably better at the drill. When the purpose of the drill has been accomplished, the students should ask the instructor to check their work. (See “Instructor Inspection” below.)

**Increasing the Degree of Difficulty**

Exercises should start out easy on the first round and then become gradually more challenging on subsequent rounds. The important goal in the first few rounds is to get the student comfortable with the process, familiar with the scenario and methods involved, and oriented to the desired result. For example, in an exercise geared to handling regular versus upset customers, the first run would include routine questions and only mild complaints from somewhat polite customers. On further runs through the drill, the level of difficulty is increased—always gradually, never abruptly—by having the customer present more complex problems, stronger emotions, and more unreasonable demands, requiring greater patience, more attentive listening, and more resourceful problem solving by the student. The increase in degree of difficulty should be proportional to the student’s level of ability, that is, not so difficult that the exercise stalls, and not so easy that it has little or no impact on advancing the tech’s development of soft skills.

**Instructor Inspection**

In the instructions for each scenario, students are asked toalert the instructor when they feel the purpose of the exercise has been accomplished. At this point the instructor (or assistant) checks the team’s work by either stepping into the scenario and playing the role and seeing how the tech handles it, or by watching the two students perform the exercises themselves. He may also inspect a video of the drill.

The supervisor should inspect the following points:

* Is the person acting as the customer or other person in the workplace performing the role properly, such as by presenting realistic scenarios?
* Is the drill being kept at a level of difficulty that challenges the tech without overwhelming, and thereby acts to increase his or her confidence, rather than causing a loss of confidence?
* Are the challenges being presented by the customer too easy, such that no real gain in capability is being achieved?
* Are the students maintaining professionalism when required?
* Is the tech handling the customer’s complaints smoothly and efficiently?
* Are their only minor communications errors (as might be expected) or are there major errors in how the tech is handling the customer?
* Is the tech making good use of supplementary methods for handling the customer, such as role-playing the idea of asking for assistance from the service manager? Or is he always trying to do it all alone?
* In the diagnostic drill, did the tech quickly gather relevant data from the customer? Did he correctly diagnosis the problem?
* In the electrical diagnosis drill, did the tech follow the correct standard procedures? Did she come up with the correct diagnosis?

If everything appears to be in order, the student(s) can move to the next set of exercises. If significant problems exist, however, the students are asked to continue the drill while focusing further attention on the areas that are still deficient and when once again ready, to come back for another inspection.

**Videoing Role-Plays**

As an additional enhancement to drilling the roll-play scenarios, the students may video their fellow students performing a drill. This option can simply make the roll-plays more fun, it can be used to show the instructor how the students are performing, or videos can be submitted for a class contest, supervised by the instructor.

The instructor may submit links to his best class videos posted on the internet or mail in a DVD or thumb drive. Auto Tech Works Publishing Group will consider them for inclusion on their website. The purpose of this would be to provide examples of the scenarios for other automotive students.

# Scenario 1—Manners

**Purpose of the drill:** To improve a student’s ability to have good manners when dealing with people in the workplace including customers. This includes what to say (please, thank you, etc.) and how to act (polite, courteous, etc.).

**Setup:** Part 1: Both students act as techs. Part 2: One student is the tech, and the other can be another tech, a customer, or another person in the workplace.

**End result:** The tech should feel comfortable with the scenario, and more certain of his ability to behave mannerly in various workplace situations. He should feel more comfortable saying all the expressions listed in the procedure and more comfortable acting mannerly in spite of negative responses from others.

**Procedure: Part 1:** The first student has a tool. The second student asks to borrow it, and the tech hands it to him. This is repeated with the first student asking for the tool, and the second student handing it to him. The techs must use polite language including these words and phrases: “please”, “thank you”, “excuse me”, and “Would you mind…?” Both techs must behave in a mannerly fashion, acting polite, courteous, sincere, respectful, kind, and nice. Continue with this part of the drill until both students have improved in their abilities, or they find it easy and comfortable.

**Procedure: Part 2:** The two students come up with a work-related question or topic of discussion and determine what role the second student will play. (The first student is the tech.) For example, a tech will ask the parts-counter person if the gasket he ordered has arrived. Run through the drill once with both people being polite and maintaining good manners throughout. Run through it again, with the second student acting mildly ill-mannered (irritated, rude, etc.). The tech must remain professional and act with good manners. Repeat the drill until the second student is able to act fairly rude and negative, but the tech maintains good manners. Once this is achieved, run through the drill once more, where you both exhibit good manners, so you can end on a positive note.

Part 2 may be repeated with the second student having a different role, and the drill being run with a different topic of discussion.

# Scenario 2—Efficiency

**Purpose of the drill:** To improve the student’s ability to do tasks in a more efficient manner, without compromising quality.

**Setup:** An actual vehicle will be used for this drill. One student acts as an auto tech who has been assigned a specific repair task. The second student is the timer and will observe and time the other student.

**End result of the drill:** The tech should be able to improve his time on a task, and show that he understands how to increase his efficiency while maintaining quality.

**Procedure:** The timer (or instructor) assigns a repair on a vehicle to the student tech. The timer times the tech, and observes the level of efficiency the tech uses in completing the task. The same task is repeated again, with the goal of beating the previous time. If the tech is having difficulty, the timer can suggest ways to be more efficient, and the task can be done again.

Safety is always first. Second, never compromise quality. Start with a short easy task, such as removing a bolt, and work up to lengthier more complex tasks. You can do this drill at any point during the semester, as you learn new types of repairs. Efficiency ideas include: using electric tools versus hand tools, organizing your tools and parts, forcing yourself to move faster, and focusing more intently.

Alternatively, your instructor can set up a contest with more than one vehicle, and have several techs competing in the same task to see who can complete the task first.

Another idea is to have pairs of students compete together as a team with more complex tasks. This creates a whole new set of teamwork related efficiency skills involving helping, delegating, communicating, etc.

# Appendix B: Positive Character Traits

Exercise: Select a dozen or so traits from the list below that you want to improve about yourself. Write each one on an index card. Each day shuffle the cards and pick one. Spend the day focusing on improving that character trait as you go through your day. Do this daily. Be persistent. It can take a lot of work to change engrained thoughts or behaviors. The rewards will make it well worth it.

Positive Character Traits

adaptable

conscientious

considerate

courteous

determined

diligent

diplomatic

efficient

energetic

fair-minded

flexible

forgiving

friendly

generous

hard-working

having integrity

helpful

honest

humble

kind

loyal

neat

nice

patient

persistent

polite

pro-active

professional

reliable

respectful

responsible

self-disciplined

sociable

tough

Feel free to add your own traits. There are numerous online lists; some with as many as five hundred traits. I have included the websites for two of these lists in the bibliography at the end of the book.

# 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.*

Good

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Fast Cheap

# Quiz – Chapters 1 – 3

**Soft-Skills Workbook for Auto Techs -** Student name:

**Matching. Some numbered terms will have more than one answer. Match all alphabetic phrases with a numbered term.**

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ dress code
2. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ cleanliness
3. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ personal hygiene
4. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ good manners
5. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ clean language
6. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ smoking
7. using fender covers
8. refraining from swearing
9. could start a fire
10. being courteous
11. using floor mats
12. taking a shower
13. wearing the shop uniform
14. listening carefully
15. saying “please” and “thank you”
16. wastes time when you should be working
17. showing respect

**Short Answer**

1. Name three things that might make you ineligible for employment.

1.

2.

3.

**Matching**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ honesty
2. \_\_\_\_\_ integrity
3. \_\_\_\_\_ reliability
4. \_\_\_\_\_ respect
5. the quality of being true to one’s moral beliefs even when it would be easier to ignore them
6. the quality of being able to be trusted; being dependable
7. the quality of being truthful and trustworthy; refusing to lie, cheat, or steal
8. concern, consideration, politeness