CAREERS IN SERVICE STATION OPERATION

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SERVICE STATION OPERATION

SERVING THE NEEDS OF TRAVELERS NATIONWIDE

Opportunity to Own Your Own Business

SERVICE STATIONS ARE SO MUCH A PART OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE THAT you might not have thought of their overall importance to society. In one form or another, service stations have existed for almost a century, and they have changed and evolved according to the needs of the drivers and the vehicles they drive. From the early days of a 30-gallon tank connected to a garden hose, which the driver used to pump his own five gallons of gas, to today's mega stations with dozens of pumps and thousands of

gallons of fuel in underground tanks, service stations have provided a basic need to automobile owners and renters across the nation.

You may not realize that service stations have a long and proud history, or that they exist in a variety of forms, even today. From corner gas stations that provide both full and self-service pumps, to stations that offer basic or more extensive automobile repair and maintenance services along with gas, to large convenience stores that offer a wide variety of groceries and car washes along with the fill-up of the tank, service stations are created to fill whatever needs exist in a particular location.

The locations themselves vary widely: from the modern, gleaming station in the middle of the city or suburb, to the smaller family-run location in a small town, to mountainside and mid-desert refueling stops, military base stations, ocean side, from Alaska to Hawaii. Any place, no matter how remote, that has residents or visitors who travel by car will need a service station to provide some level of automotive and possibly grocery needs.

Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of work in the service station industry is the opportunity to manage or own your own business, whether independent or franchise. Until the day when cars run solely on alternative fuels (such as electric or solar), a day which appears to be many years in the future, consumers will need gas and automotive services to keep their cars running and problem-free. An enterprising business person with a flair for customer service and a willingness to work hard can earn an excellent living, knowing that a basic societal need is being met by the operation.

A service station can provide the owner or manager a good way to become involved in a community as well. Getting to know regular customers, hiring local people to work in the station and contributing to public events, such as local parades and fundraisers, not only attract attention for your business, but offer the opportunity to make friendships and partnerships that might not exist otherwise. Being able to make a contribution to a neighborhood or community is just one of the many positive possibilities in this career path.

In other words, working for a service station involves more than just pumping gas. This career path offers the chance at growth and possibly management or ownership opportunities, the chance to help a community grow and prosper, and the knowledge that you're providing a needed service to others on a daily basis.

YOU CAN START EXPLORING THIS CAREER TODAY

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OF A FUTURE CAREER IN THE SERVICE station industry, there's no time like the present to learn more about it. Even if you're still finishing school, there are plenty of ways for you to learn about career options in this industry in the meantime.

First, contact your school guidance counselor. Are you a management or entrepreneurial type of person, someone who would enjoy the challenge of owning and running a business? As you will learn, running a business has many different requirements, including customer service, good business sense, detailed accounting, a willingness to continue educating yourself about your industry and becoming a good employer. Consider taking a personality inventory test, to see if you might have the interests and personality needed for such a career path.

Since service stations exist in one form or another in almost every size of community, find the ones closest to you and see if they're hiring on a part-time or summer employee basis. Any position, even entry level, would give you an insider's view to how a station is run and what goes on behind the scenes. Even if they're not hiring, ask to interview some of the employees (again, any employee could be helpful, but it would be especially useful to speak with the owner or manager) and discuss the work that's done there, what they see as necessary in an employee, and what skills they'd recommend developing before pursuing that career. Interviews and hands-on experience would both give valuable insight into this profession and whether it's the right one for you.

HISTORY OF THIS CAREER

THE HISTORY OF SERVICE STATIONS BEGINS WITH THE RISE OF THE AUTOMOBILE AS A primary source of transportation. Before autos existed, there was no need for a service station. But when Henry Ford launched his first mass-produced vehicles, a new market and industry was created alongside automobile production.

However, early service stations were a far cry from today's multi-service convenience stores. When cars were an early luxury, there was little need for gas stations on every corner. Initially gasoline was stocked only by a few dry good stores, and motorists purchased gas in buckets, pouring it into their tanks with funnels.

Automobiles proved to be a huge growth industry. In 1900 there were only 8,000 vehicles registered in the US; nine years later, over 300,000 were registered. By 1920, the figure had reached 7.5 million.

Even early cars ran on gas, and that gas was produced as a byproduct of kerosene refining. In 1907, the Standard Oil Company of California saw a good opportunity and built the first service station near its Seattle kerosene refinery. The first station was only a shed, a 30-gallon tank and a garden hose to transfer the gas to the car's tank, but it was a huge success. To make it even more convenient to customers, the owner put a canopy over the shed to keep people dry during Seattle's frequent rains.

Gasoline stations were initially self serve only, with the most common amenities being free air for tires, restrooms, and occasionally cold water to drink. During World War I, California dealers planted vegetable gardens on station grounds to promote community relations and the war effort.

During the late 1920s, two new developments set the stage for major expansion in following years. The first was the advent of full-service stations. As gas stations grew in popularity, enterprising station owners added a variety of amenities, including water fountains and vending machines. These were provided as ways to keep customers busy during the slow fueling process (filling a five-gallon gas tank could take as long as eight minutes). To increase customer satisfaction, stations added attendants who filled the tank for the customer, washed their windshields, and checked the oil. The popularity of full-service stations boomed, and full service became the standard until the oil crisis of the 1970s, when self serve returned to popularity due to its lower costs.

The second achievement of the 1920s was the creation of the convenience store in 1927. A manager of a Southland Ice Company ice dock in Dallas decided to add a few groceries to his shop to increase sales during the winter months, when ice sales declined. As the ice dock had longer hours than the average grocery store did then, customers were pleased to find groceries available at more convenient times. That shop eventually became one of the first 7-Elevens.

Although convenience stores and service stations didn't join forces until later in the century, they were seemingly destined to go together as a major consumer retail convenience. The Depression years slowed growth for both types of stores, but the post-World War II economic boom found service stations growing to new heights. Some stations were designed in eye-catching motifs, built in shapes like pyramids and teepees, or even resembling Charles Lindbergh's famous airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis. A station in Miami Beach included a working lighthouse, hotel, restaurant and bar, and it provided customers with engraved stationery.

But not all of the amenities were strictly decorative. Early automobiles were experiments in progress, and needed frequent and continual repair and maintenance work. Station managers and owners were quick to add service bays to their gas stations, providing customers maintenance along with their fuel needs. By adding motor products, such as oil, and the beginning of convenience items, such as paper goods and basic groceries, service stations began to evolve into the form we're familiar with today.

The biggest change that took place in the late 1900s was the return to self-serve operation in the 1970s. The oil crisis of that time led to high prices and shortages, and station managers and owners who were looking for ways to price their products competitively soon realized that allowing customers to pump their own gas would not only reduce time, it would save money in terms of staffing – a cost savings that could be passed onto the price-conscious consumer. Although few stations offered self serve in 1970, by 1978 almost 70% of stations offered at least some self-serve pumps. That trend continues today, with the majority of stations offering self serve only, with no full service available at all.

Another trend is reduced availability of maintenance and repair facilities at service stations. As technology has evolved, cars require far less work than vehicles of 50 years ago. Routine maintenance is not needed nearly as often, and cars usually don't break down as quickly. In addition, chains of car maintenance and repair companies have come into existence, offering the same services at lower prices, able to make up the difference by quantity. Consequently, service stations have moved away from the reduced profits of service bays into the more lucrative world of convenience stores and groceries.

Today's service stations are much more streamlined and modern compared to the shed with the 30-gallon tank of 1907. Customers can fill up their 15-20 gallon tanks, purchase a few convenience items, and be back on the freeway in the same amount of time it used to take to fill a five-gallon tank. The average service station can handle as many as 1400 cars per day and pump 400,000 gallons of gas in a month.

Cars have

changed, from Model T's to station wagons to minivans and SUVs, but they all have one thing in common: they all need fuel, and they are all driven by people who appreciate the speed and convenience of a well-run service station.

WHERE YOU WILL WORK

THE LOCATION OF EMPLOYEES IN THE SERVICE STATION INDUSTRY IS FAIRLY SIMPLE: you work wherever the station is. Service stations are located throughout the United States, from large cities with millions of people to rural areas, where a station might comprise the only business in a township or unincorporated village.

Stations may be located on busy street corners, inside large technical or industrial parks, in seasonal tourist areas, or along interstates and other busy roadways. Service stations exist in every kind of climate, from steamy tropical locales to the long winters of Alaska. Wherever someone may need fuel for vehicles, a service station will fill that need.

Where someone works within a specific station will depend on what type of station it is and what services it provides. While full-service stations are in the minority today, there are still many stations that have attendants who work the pumps, check the oil, clean the windshields, and put air in tires. Those attendants work both outdoors, where they wait on customers, and indoors within the station building, ringing up purchases. When working outdoors, attendants will have to work in every kind of weather, from pleasant sunny warm days to blistering heat, pouring rain, and frigid cold. In fully self serve stations, most employees work indoors, ringing up sales (which may include groceries), in the service bay, changing oil or performing other automotive repair and maintenance tasks. Some service bays may be small, with a capacity for only one or two vehicles, while others may be larger, holding several vehicles.

Employees may be expected to stock merchandise and supplies in convenience stores or service bays. If the station is in a landscaped area, employees may work outside part time, mowing grass or trimming weeds.

Owners and managers, particularly of larger stations, will have offices in the back which they may share with bookkeepers or other administrative staff. Depending on the size of the station, these offices may be large or small, with or without windows. Owners and managers of larger stations may also spend some of their work time on the road, visiting large clients and attending conventions or governmental regulatory information and education sessions.

Occasionally managers or owners of large or multi-location stations will also be invited to visit vendor sites, such as oil fields or distribution centers. For companies that own several service stations, owners and managers may spend part of their time visiting the individual locations. In those cases, the owner may have a headquarters office in one of the stations or at a completely separate location.

THE WORK YOU WILL DO

JOB DESCRIPTIONS WITHIN THE SERVICE STATION INDUSTRY VARY GREATLY DEPENDING on the size, location and type of amenities offered by the station. When applying for a position, it's wise to ask for a detailed job description, but don't assume that the duties required by Station A would be the same as those required by Station B. In general, the larger the station, the more likely employees are to have a narrowly defined set of duties, while at smaller stations, employees will be called upon to handle a wider array of tasks. But even in larger stations, the work components are easily observed by all employees, giving everyone a chance to learn more about the work of others. By learning about the different kinds of jobs, you have the ability not only to gain additional skills, but to make an informed decision about which jobs are best suited for you.

Cashier This is usually the entry level position for people who have had no previous experience working in service stations.

The primary task for cashiers is to handle all monetary transactions for the station, whether it's collecting payments for gasoline, ringing up grocery sales, or charging customers for work done on their vehicles. Cashiers will process credit card payments, make change for cash payments and possibly write up receipts for in-house charges. They are responsible for balancing the cash drawer, accurately tallying up the

amount of money in the drawer at the beginning and end of each work shift and noting any overages or shortages. The exception to that are some larger stations, where the manager handles the balancing of the drawer.

Cashiers should have a pleasant customer service manner, able not only to collect payments but answer customers' questions and provide necessary information. Cashiers may also be responsible for answering the phone, straightening stock (especially in convenience stores), monitoring the cleanliness of rest rooms, and accepting deliveries from vendors.

Attendant The attendant position doesn't exist at every station, only those that offer full service. Some stations might be all full service, but usually there are a few pumps allocated to full service and the rest to self service in an effort to accommodate the preferences of all customers.

Attendants have the same responsibilities as cashiers, but in addition they go out to the pump to greet customers who have just driven up. They fill the customer's tank with the type of gasoline requested, and while the tank is filling, they wash the windshields, check the oil and check the tires to see if they need air. Attendants may be asked to fill small orders (such as the purchase of soda pop or bread from the station's convenience store). The attendant must work in any kind of weather, so it's important that they have a cheerful disposition when waiting on customers, who are paying extra for the full service. In smaller stations that have service bays, the attendant may also be a junior mechanic, dividing work time between the gas pump and the service bay.

Administration Not every service station has administrative staff. In smaller stations, the administrative functions may be divided between the owner and the manager or even handled by the cashier. But for larger or multi-location stations, administrative staff may be hired to handle either clerical or accounting work. These positions offer great insight into the workings of a service station and can give employees, especially those interested in future management or ownership, a thorough understanding of the cost and profit structure of a service station.

Clerical workers will be responsible for managing paperwork, placing orders, following up on regulatory inspections and handling customer service issues. Bookkeeping clerks will usually handle most of the station's bookkeeping needs, including accounts payable and/or receivable, payroll, basic tax preparation, production of financial reports including balance sheets and income statements, and maintenance of the general ledger. In some cases one person or a team will handle both clerical and bookkeeping responsibilities.

Technician The technician, also known as the mechanic, is responsible for providing automotive maintenance and repair. Some stations offer services limited primarily to preventive care, such as oil changes, tire rotation, or air conditioning tune-ups. Some may offer basic repair, such as patching holes in tires or replacing windshield wipers.

There are stations that still offer full repair or body shops, but most of this work has been taken over by outlets of large chains which handle those kinds of repairs exclusively. Today's service station technician is much more likely to be doing preventive maintenance and minor repair.

If the technician is employed by a smaller station that offers full pump service, the technician may be the attendant as well. The technician may also act as the cashier for the service bay area of the station. This employee may also be responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the work area as well as keeping track of supplies, placing orders for routine parts and special orders for customers.

Manager The manager of a service station usually has a wide variety of duties, varying among the different types of stations. Managers are responsible for the overall operation of the station. Functions can include any or all of the following:

- Hiring and training new employees
- Handling customer service issues
- Keeping close watch on inventory and placing orders at the appropriate times
- Reporting on operations and issues to the owner
- Acting as liaison for regulatory inspectors
- Monitoring employee activity to make sure the station is operating efficiently
- Analyzing sales performance and competitive measures
- Working up proposals on marketing campaigns
- Coordinating community recognition efforts and charitable donations
- Maintaining the physical condition of the station
- Keeping up on industry news and trends

If there is a service bay, the manager may be in charge of that as well, or there may be a separate manager who handles the service bay, working as a team with the station manager.

Owner Station owners, like managers have many responsibilities. Job descriptions in this category vary greatly, starting with owners of small stations where they are fully involved, working in every capacity at the station several days a week. There are also owners of a number of stations in several locations or even large regional or national chains who rarely visit the stations, relying on managers for day-to-day operations, while they monitor operations and financial results in a remote office.

Owners are ultimately responsible for the success and profitability of the business, and it's their job to make sure things run right, whether by their own active management or by hiring the competent station managers. They will closely monitor competition and industry trends, making decisions that will affect the performance of the station (such as whether or not to add a car wash or convenience store, or increasing staff at later hours).

Owners that are more active participants will likely serve as backup staff, filling in when the station is short-staffed or unusually busy. They will determine the level of pay and benefits available for employees, and they will set advertising and promotional budgets.

The owner is the person establishing policy and making all final decisions.

SERVICE STATION MANAGERS AND OWNERS TELL THEIR OWN STORIES

I Own Three Service Stations "I grew up expecting to inherit the family farm, which I worked on all the years I was growing up. But when several bad years in a row took their toll on the family bank account, my parents said I should at least have a backup plan. So I went to the local college and got a two-year small business and accounting degree, figuring I could use that somehow if I needed to.

Two things happened in those two years that changed my plans. The first was I met my wife-to-be, who was completing a two-year bookkeeping course. The second was my parents lost the farm after a terrible fire caused losses far beyond what their insurance could replace.

My wife's family owned a fuel oil company with one gas station. Their primary business was delivering heating fuel to rural home owners and farmers. They took me on as a fuel oil driver, at first on a temporary basis. My wife was working as their bookkeeper, and together we were able to make ends meet enough to buy a small house and start thinking about having a family of our own. When our first child was born, I was only driving half time, spending the other half acting as the manager at the station.

Then my father-in-law decided he'd like to retire and asked me if I wanted to take over the family business. It was around the same time that natural gas began replacing fuel oil as the primary source of home heating, so that part of the business was going downhill. But the population of our town, the largest for many miles around, was growing. We decided to sell the heating fuel business before the losses got any worse. After we disposed of that, I went to the bank with my father-in-law as co-signer and got a loan to build a second station on the outskirts of town, with a convenience store attached (the original station didn't have one at that time).

The convenience store was a big hit, so big that I was able to reduce the loan much more quickly than I'd planned. Based on the good performance there, I added an automated car wash, which was also a big success.

Three years later I opened a third station with a convenience store and a car wash in a small town 15 miles away. It does a good business and doesn't appear to be siphoning sales off my other stations. The original station I've left pretty much as is, except I expanded the service bays with a rapid oil change bay. We've done away with full-service pumps everywhere but the original station, as I have a number of regular customers there who depend on full service.

The nice thing about this business is that it's pretty stable, it provides something that's necessary for the town, and it gives me a way to be useful in the community. I've employed countless teenagers in the stations, some of whom worked for me several summers in a row and still come to visit, even though they've long since moved out of town. I put up a small scholarship fund for the local high school, and I donate to local charities, buy ad space in the local paper and high school yearbook, and allow lots of kids' groups to use my parking lots for fundraisers. The stations have been good to me – they gave me a way to make a nice living for my family, and it's good that I can give something back."

I Am a Service Station Manager "You could say I came into my career by accident. By that I mean I didn't set out to become a service station manager, but took a job at one almost as a whim and found I liked it enough to stick with it and try to move my way up the ranks. When I was in high school, one of my best buddies, who was a year older, got a job as an attendant at a full service gas station in town for the summer. I wasn't legally old enough to work yet, and I was bored. So I'd bike down to the station and hang around, just for something to do. I'm guessing it drove the owner nuts! But he was decent about it, didn't bother me as long as I didn't get in the way of my friend's work.

It was a great place, an old-time small town gas station where the employees all wore grease monkey coveralls. They had six pumps and two service bays, but no food except for a candy counter and a soda cooler. In the summer the Boy Scouts would come and do car washes. The people who worked there were friendly, and I spent many hours hanging out in the service bays. The mechanics would talk to me about the cars they were working on, and if they weren't too busy they'd take the time to really show me how cars are put together and what it takes to keep them running. I asked lots of questions, and at home my Dad would fill in the gaps or explain things I hadn't understood the first time. By the end of the summer, the owner said if I wanted a job the next summer I could have it.

So I did. The next summer I started as an attendant, filling gas tanks and washing windshields, still hanging out in the service bays when there were no customers out front. Sometimes the work was boring, and any day that was over 90 degrees or pouring rain was a day I didn't necessarily like my job. But the nicer I tried to be to customers, the better chance I had of getting an occasional tip. I was still learning about cars, and the mechanics would let me help sometimes.

When I graduated from high school, the owner asked if I wanted a job training to be a mechanic. The deal was the station would pay for a nine-month course at a nearby vocational-technical school while I worked full time at the station, half of the time in the service area and half of the time pumping gas. The pay was OK, not great, but since the station was paying my tuition it worked out.

During that time, a new manufacturer came to town and opened a new factory. The town grew quite fast as people moved in to take the new jobs. I thought about applying there, but I still liked working around cars. Things got a bit tougher, though, because along with the factory and more people came more service stations. Looking back, I'd say we were a bit too comfortable, being the only station in town. But I thought there would be enough room for all of us, and the only thing that would sink our station would be if we didn't grow too.

The owner, after some persuading, agreed to let me draw up some plans for changes. Watching the other stations, I noticed that their gas was cheaper because they used self-serve pumps – and people were lining up to use them. We'd always thought no one would want to pump their own gas. Well, they do if it saves them money. So we switched some of our pumps over to self-serve and lowered the price on them. Business picked up right away. People even liked cleaning their own windshields.

I also noticed one other station offering milk as well as soda pop, so we added milk and a few other grocery staples. It was tough at times, but we made it. There are now three stations in town, and we're still on top.

The owner was planning to retire and spend the winter in Arizona, so I was promoted to station manager. The owner still checks in daily, usually on the phone. I've thought of offering to buy the station, something we've talked about before. But I think my boss likes keeping connected to it for now, and that's fine with me. I still hang out in the service bay with the mechanics when things are slow, and I still love being around cars."

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

WHEN SERVICE STATIONS FIRST CAME INTO EXISTENCE, THE MAIN PERSONAL qualification needed was the ability to plan ahead and order enough fuel to avoid running out. But as the needs of vehicles and their drivers have grown over the years, so have the qualities needed to run a successful service station. And while the industry itself changes directions over time – as in the swing from full service stations to self- service stations in the 1970s – the characteristics of successful owners and employees of service stations haven't so much changed as grown. The following description of attributes is a guide to help you understand whether this is potentially a good career path for you. If you're not sure if you have some or all of these characteristics, talk to your school guidance counselor, teachers, employer (if you have one) or close friends and family to get their perspective.

One of the most important qualities, from the entry-level attendant all the way up to owner, is the ability and willingness to work hard while maintaining a good attitude. Days can be long at service stations, and for employees who work at least part of the time outdoors, exposed to extreme temperatures, the days can be wearing. Owners and managers may put in extra hours during busy or understaffed times. The ability to put aside the frustrations of long hours under less than ideal circumstances will contribute greatly to future success.

Being in good physical shape, while not necessarily required, is recommended. Attendants who are on their feet all day, bending at odd angles to clean windshields or check tires, or mechanics who may be working over their heads or under vehicles will find the job less tiring and stressful if they are in good physical shape. That in turn will contribute to an overall satisfaction with the work.

A willingness to be flexible is important. The needs of customers can and will change, and station employees and owners must be willing to change with them. If customers want full service, be prepared to offer it. But if gas prices take a sudden hike, those same customers may prefer to save some money by pumping their own gas. A station that is slow to accommodate its customers will lose business, unless they are many miles from the next station (a situation that's rare today when most stations are competing with other stations in close proximity).

The willingness to be flexible goes hand-in-hand with the ability to understand your customers and be alert to their needs. Carefully monitoring business trends and what the competition is doing as well as

what succeeds in your own business is critical. That means you need to be able to view success based both on what's in the cash register at the end of the day, and also with an eye on customer and employee satisfaction in the long term.

Attention to detail is important as well. Watching for the little things that keep customers coming back is not the only area where attention is critical. Service stations deal in hazardous substances and are subject to legal and governmental scrutiny. Staying on top of all regulatory, health and safety issues will prevent problems that could be devastating.

The ability to assess situations and possibly take risks is important. This means being able to look at your business overall and determine how it could be improved. Weighing the pros and cons in opening an attached convenience store, for example, represents a potential financial risk, but it's warranted if the station is located in a suburban area where residents might like to have one stop where they could fill their cars and purchase milk at the same time. Sometimes that assessment may work the other way, such as deciding to close a service bay if business is down and no amount of promotional activity is helping. Looking hard at the possibilities in every direction and making an informed decision is a must.

ATTRACTIVE FEATURES OF THIS CAREER

THERE ARE MANY POSITIVE ASPECTS OF A CAREER IN THE SERVICE STATION INDUSTRY. That may come as a surprise if you have not thought about service stations in any way other than their usefulness to you (when you need gas or an oil change, for example). But as a basic industry in the American economy, service stations do offer rewards to their employees and owners.

The first is potential longevity. Unless technology is created to manufacture inexpensive vehicles that don't need fuel to run, service stations will be a necessary part of any vehicle owner's life. This doesn't mean that all service stations will automatically be a success, but it does mean that a well-run business will have much better odds of long term survival, as it's not likely to become obsolete.

Part of the satisfaction of this kind of work comes from knowing you're providing needed services and supplies to your customers. A career in which you make people's lives easier by providing them ready access to the necessities of their day-to-day routines gives you the feeling of accomplishment, of knowing what you do is worthwhile and appreciated. This kind of work can lead to a sense of community, of belonging and

helping. It often allows you to get to know your customers, especially the regulars, who are the mainstay of the business.

Depending on the position, flexibility in scheduling is another plus. Because stations are open long hours, sometimes 24 hours a day, many stations offer a variety of hours to work, which makes it ideal for employees who would like to have something other than the normal nine to five work week. Usually service stations will have both full and part-time work available, allowing for more options.

Another kind of flexibility is possible in this line of work, and that's career flexibility. Someone who starts out in an entry-level position, such as attendant, has the possibility of moving into other positions, such as being trained for service bay work or training to become a manager. The skills learned on the job also transfer well to other communities, so changing locations is rarely a problem.

Ownership of service stations is a realistic potential goal for someone with experience and financial backing. Working knowledge of the fuel industry could be used to apply for work with one of the large fuel companies as well. Beyond that, the customer service and business management skills that can be gained from this career are applicable to other careers as well, providing a good background for a transition to another line of work.

Because the industry itself changes over time, there is the possibility for a changing workplace, one that remains interesting as it evolves. For example, the owner of a small gas station may decide to add a car wash or convenience store or develop a new maintenance facility. The planning, construction and implementation of such a plan will change the way the day-to-day work is done, providing a change in routine. The business has room for experimentation, allowing for some creative entrepreneurial thinking that's attractive to many people.

UNATTRACTIVE FEATURES

NO CAREER IS COMPLETELY PERFECT. NO MATTER HOW VALUABLE THE POSITION IS and how much you may like it overall, there are always going to be aspects of any job that are less desirable than others. That doesn't mean you shouldn't pursue a particular line of work – it just means you should be aware of the less likable aspects of the job to avoid any unpleasant surprises in the future. The service station industry is no exception. While it has many positive attributes, it also has a few negative factors that should be considered before pursuing employment in this field.

Among the things you should consider are the hours. While service stations offer flexibility of schedules, many round-the-clock stations will place entry level staff at undesirable times (late at night, very early in the morning, weekends, holidays), reserving the regular working hours for full-time or senior staff.

If those hours are late at night, safety and security can be an issue. Convenience stores are sometimes targets for robbery. Many convenience stores that are open late have begun adding extra security features, including unbreakable shields that separate cashiers from customers, but robbery is still a possibility. The isolation of working alone late at night or early in the morning, when there are fewer customers, can be monotonous and lonely.

Service stations that offer automobile maintenance and repair services can be fascinating, but they can also expose employees to hazardous substances. Extreme caution must be used by all employees handling those substances. In addition, working on cars is dirty work. Many stations provide employee uniforms, but extra care to keep them clean under those circumstances is required.

Dealing with the public can be enjoyable, but it can also be difficult. Tired, irritable customers who are unhappy with the speed of service or the prices of gasoline and car repair may take out their frustration on the closest employee, often an employee who can't do anything about the problem. It can be hard not to react and to continue serving the customer in a pleasant manner, but that's part of the job. It can also be unpleasant to work with difficult employees, who may also take their frustrations out on co-workers.

Employees in stations that offer full service must deal with the difficulties of the weather. Just because the temperature is extremely high or low doesn't mean you don't have to do your job; the customers still need to have their gas tanks filled, oil checked, windshields washed and tires filled.

Entry level workers may find the work hard for low pay, especially during times when gas prices are high and stations are trying to cap costs starting with employee salaries. Pay scales generally improve with seniority and promotion, but entry level can be very low.

As a manager or owner, you are somewhat subject to the whims of the marketplace. If gas prices rise, people may find ways to conserve gas, thus filling their tanks less often. Or there may be increased problems with drive-away theft (when someone fills their tank at a self serve island but drives away without paying). In times of low unemployment, finding staff to handle the entry level jobs can be difficult, especially if the station is not making enough money to pay higher than average wages. The stress of solving problems like these can be exhausting.

Perhaps the greatest hardship facing employees of service stations is competition. In large cities, a neighborhood station which has served its community for years, suddenly has two new competitors in as many blocks who offer a wider array of services and lower prices. Stations in this situation have to make a difficult decision: is it worthwhile staying in business, hoping to ride out the competition, or exit altogether? These kinds of decisions are always difficult and stressful.

PREPARATION YOU WILL NEED

GETTING STARTED IN THE SERVICE STATION INDUSTRY CAN BE SIMPLE. IN TERMS OF education and training, the vast majority of jobs require only a high school diploma or GED (some won't accept a GED, while others may not require either).

Mechanics or technicians need training in automotive maintenance and repair, some of which may be provided by programs developed for large station franchises.

On-the-job training is common, but there are also two- and four-year degree programs that would be useful, and in some cases required, for management positions and owners. What individual stations will require for each position will depend on the range of the station's services, the location and employee pool for each station, and the willingness of the station's management or ownership to train and develop employees rather than only hiring experienced staff. Be sure to inquire about educational and training requirements at each station you want to apply to, since policies will vary from station to station.

Cashier As an entry level position, this job is the least likely in a service station to have significant educational requirements. Some stations will require a high school diploma or GED, although that may be required only for full-time employees. In other stations, high school students may be allowed to work on a part-time basis. An applicant who has a diploma and previous relevant work experience (any cashiering or retail sales experience would be relevant) would probably be hired before someone without a diploma and experience. For the most part, however, training for this position is done on the job by the manager or other employees.

Attendant Like cashiers, stations that still employ attendants consider them to be entry level as well. Training in the finer points of customer service and basic automotive inspection is usually handled at the station. High school diplomas are preferred, but high school students will be hired on a part-time basis. Any work experience that is related to customer service is useful when applying for these kinds of positions, which require the employee to be courteous and helpful. Automotive care courses in high school are useful, especially those which cover preventive maintenance.

Administration Stations that have administrative staff are looking primarily for secretarial or bookkeeping skills, or a combination of both. Stations large enough to employ full-time administrative staff are likely to expect experience or prior training. A high school diploma or GED would be mandatory, and courses in bookkeeping and computer skills would be useful. In most cases a one- or two-year course at a post-high school vocational-technical institute, focusing on clerical, computer or bookkeeping training, would be sufficient. Candidates for this kind of work may be asked to undergo testing to demonstrate their abilities prior to hiring.

Technician In the past, mechanics and technicians were hired and trained on the job. However, today that's a much rarer occurrence. Vehicles have become more streamlined, yet more complex, thanks to the increased use of computerized technology to operate. Stations that offer limited services, such as oil changes, still need employees knowledgeable about current technology. Besides the mandatory high school diploma or GED, today's technicians and mechanics generally have undergone specialized training, whether it's a one- or two-year automotive program at a vocational-technical institute, or for stations that offer limited services, an in-house certification program (usually offered only by large chains and franchises).

Manager A high school diploma is the minimum required to become a manager at a service station. For smaller locations in more remote areas, the diploma may be enough to be hired as a manager. But many of today's larger or more urban stations expect more: relevant work or management experience, completion of in-house certification programs (for chain or franchise stations), and in some cases, a minimum two-year business degree from a business or vocational technical college is required.

Students who have completed four-year business degrees are well-positioned to fast-track their way to senior management positions in large oil companies. In this position, the more education you have amounts to the better opportunities you will have, if you're interested in top management positions.

Owner Owners can have any kind of educational background, as long as they have, or can raise the money to purchase the station. But to keep the station running and competitive, it may take more than a high school diploma. A two-year business management degree is recommended, and

potential franchise and multi-location owners should consider acquiring a four-year degree. While not required, it could provide valuable insight into business and management techniques as well as make a candidate more credible to potential lenders.

WHAT YOU CAN EARN

BECAUSE THE FIELD ITSELF IS SO DIVERSE, EARNINGS IN THE SERVICE STATION industry can vary a great deal. What the salary will be is not only dependent on the usual criteria of experience and seniority, but on how large the station is, the variety of services it offers, the level of competition in the area and how large a community it serves. Generally, the larger the station and community, the better the pay. However, some stations offer more advanced mechanical services, and while the stations themselves might not be large, they may pay more for educated and experienced technicians and managers.

Cashier

This is often the most entry level of positions, and the pay scale is reflected accordingly. Cashiers may start out at minimum wage, unless they're in an area of low unemployment or they have relevant work experience. Many cashiers work on a part-time basis, which often means there are few or no additional benefits, except the occasional employee discount. Salaries can range from minimum wage to as much as $10 to $12 per hour for an experienced, senior cashier.

Attendant

This is a position that doesn't exist in most of today's service stations, and consequently pay scales are dependent on the size of the community and the profitability of the station. Full service stations generally charge more per gallon of gas to cover the cost of the attendant, but since these stations also offer self service pumps, the attendant probably has other responsibilities or may be acting as the cashier as well. The pay scale for attendants is similar to that of cashiers, beginning at minimum wage and running up to $10 to $12 per hour. However, attendants may also receive tips from customers, which would increase the overall hourly average.

Administration

Not all stations have administrative staff, but the larger stations that do will generally pay rates starting at minimum wage and increasing to $12 to $15 per hour for experienced help. In some cases, these positions are full time and salaried, and employees might receive additional benefits, such as paid vacation and health benefits.

Technician

Technicians and mechanics benefit from having work that is rarely entry level, usually requiring experience and training. Positions are more likely to be full-time salaried jobs, complete with employee benefits and the possibility of additional training. Salaries start at approximately $25,000 per year for a beginning mechanic and can reach $35,000 to $40,000 for an experienced mechanic with a high level of expertise, less for stations that offer simple work like oil changes.

Manager

Managers of service stations receive salaries and benefits, and those who manage large stations or several branch locations are capable of earning a comfortable living. Entry level management (those hired into a large company's training program) can start at approximately $25,000 per year, but an experienced, senior manager can earn as much as $40,000 to $50,000 per year, or even more for managers who are responsible for several branches.

Owner

Owner salaries vary widely, depending on the size and location of the station. A small gas station in a remote location may earn the owner $25,000 or less per year, while an owner who has several stations in a busy urban area can earn as much as $80,000 to $100,000 annually.

OUTLOOK FOR THIS CAREER

THE CHANGES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE IN THIS INDUSTRY OVER THE LAST CENTURY have been extensive, from the early days with the garden hose hooked up to a barrel of gas to today's multi-pump stations with everything from car washes to convenience stores to oil change bays. The needs of the customer have changed, and as those needs change, so do the employment requirements of the industry.

Service stations were probably at their highest level of employment in the 1960s and early 1970s, when full service stations were the standard and service bays were usually attached. Today the trend is more towards self serve, reducing the need for staff to pump gas, and many stations have done away with service bays in light of continued competition from businesses that specialize solely in automotive care. There's a continuing move towards gas stations combining with convenience stores, but when the gas stations are strictly self serve the need for employees is still not as high as it was in the heyday of full service stations.

Consequently, the current outlook for this career depends on the type of position wanted and the needs of the marketplace. On one hand, the need for fuel for vehicles is at an all-time high; consumers are driving more cars and trucks than ever before, with the trend toward larger vehicles, like vans and SUVs, that burn more gas. While research is being done to develop vehicles that are less dependent on fuel (or not dependent at all), it's reasonable to assume it will be many years before those kinds of vehicles are the standard. In the meantime, consumers will continue to seek out service stations for their fuel needs.

But on the other hand, unless full service stations make an unexpected leap in popularity, self service pumps are acceptable to the vast majority of drivers, especially with the added convenience of being able to pay by credit card right by the pump rather than having to go into the station. Many of these kinds of stations have discontinued staffing them at night, reducing the cost and security issues by closing the actual station but leaving the pumps open for credit card transactions. After 30 years of pumping their own gas, customers don't seem to mind the self service concept at all, preferring it to waiting for an attendant, and it doesn't appear likely that that will change any time soon.

Currently it appears that entry level work will be more limited in availability, although remaining steady overall, especially in larger communities where turnover is higher. Many stations will rely on part-time

help rather than full-time in order to avoid higher wages and benefits for salaried employees.

The other segment of employment in service stations that will remain steady or decline somewhat will be the role of the technician/mechanic. As more stations focus on gasoline and groceries, avoiding the competition with rapid oil change and transmission shops, the need for mechanics will necessarily be affected.

However, there will be good opportunities for employees who want to work their way into management or future ownership. It may mean starting with entry level work on a part-time basis, but larger or franchise stations in particular have entry level management training programs that are actively seeking participants. No matter how self-sufficient a station may be, with self service pumps and automated car washes, there still needs to be managers to oversee the operation, making sure it runs smoothly and profitably. Management and ownership both have the best growth potential in this industry for the foreseeable future.

GET STARTED TODAY

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS CAREER IS TO VISIT THE different kinds of service stations in existence, if there are different kinds in your community. Visiting self service pump stations, convenience store locations and stations with car washes or service bays will give you a feel for the different types of work performed and the different kinds of customers who frequent the varying establishments. The environment of each will give you a good sense of the working conditions and requirements and how they might differ among the different types. If you do visit different stations, call ahead to see if there are employees, especially managers, who could give you a tour of the station and talk about the work performed there.

If the idea of managing or owning your own station someday is appealing, be sure to include any kind of business management, marketing and accounting courses as part of your education. Some stations will require a business or college degree, and the process of getting that degree can be started as early as high school.

One of the best ways to get started is to apply for an entry level job. A part-time position as an attendant or cashier is a great way to get a feel for the requirements of the job, and it's an excellent way to observe the different jobs available. If you decide you like this kind of work, having a part-time entry level job also gives you an edge in applying for other positions within the station, including entry to management.

If you're interested in the mechanical side of things, investigating educational programs for mechanics is a good start. If your school offers automotive training, sign up for classes. Some stations, particularly larger or franchise operations, will have on-the-job training or apprenticeship programs. Otherwise, look into programs offered at your local vocational-technical institute.

Whatever path you choose to take, there are many different directions you can go. But in order to move towards your career choice, you need to take the first step. Take the time to learn more about what interests you in the service station industry and set your plans in motion.

ASSOCIATIONS

To learn more about the world of service station employment, management or ownership, a good starting place is one of the many professional associations of the retail petroleum industry. Contacting one of these organizations will give you access to valuable information and insight on current opportunities and requirements for a career in the service station industry. Contacting these organizations can give you the opportunity not only to learn about employment openings in your area, but about possibilities across the U.S., as well as the requirements for different positions in different regions.

- **Alliance of Automotive Service Providers**
  www.aspro.org

- **Automotive Service Association**
  www.asashop.org

- **National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence**
  www.asecert.org

- **Professional Master Technicians Association**
  www.rowriter.com/pmta

- **Service Station Dealers of America**
  www.ssda-at.org

- **Service Technicians Society**
  www.sts.sae.org

- **Society of Independent Gasoline Marketers of America**
  www.sigma.org

PERIODICALS

There are periodicals devoted to the various aspects of service station industry. Studying any magazine which covers this field will give you insight into the different types of positions available, current trends, government regulations and regional differences. Understanding which aspects of this career interest you most will help narrow down your reading choices, but if you're not sure, browsing through several different magazines will give you an overview of the choices available.

- ***BodyShop Business Magazine***

- ***Modern Car Care Magazine***

- ***Motor Service***

- ***National Petroleum News***

- ***PetroMart Business***

- ***Repair Shop Product News***

- ***Station and Store***

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