The Cold Hard Truth About Starting Out

A GREAT CHOICE

Being a nail tech is a great career choice. The pay is good, the hours are flexible, and you get to create artwork while making people feel beautiful. Some days, you'll feel like you never even went to work because you spent the whole day with friends. But you should know there's a catch: All of these great things are true eventually. But at first, the hours are long, your work isn't that beautiful, and you don't know clients well enough to call them friends. But if you put in the time and do the hard work, if you listen and learn from those who are already successful, and if you continue to find ways to serve your clients, you'll find being a nail tech is an incredibly gratifying career.

ADVICE FROM THOSE WHO’VE BEEN THERE

1. Keep your personal problems at home. The salon owner is not responsible for your child-care issues, car trouble, boyfriend or husband trouble. Clients don't want to hear about your problems — they want to talk about their own.

2. Remember when you used to get sick days (or personal days for the issues mentioned above) at work? That's now a thing of the past. There is no translation for “sick day” in the nail tech manual. You inconvenience coworkers and clients on days you stay home, and you'll lose favor with both when you're not available.

3. Find your niche. Focus on what you love and do it better than anyone. This will set you apart from the other salons. Study the demographic of your area and trends in the industry to make sure the “niche” is in high demand, then promote yourself as the answer to the void in the market.

4. The nail industry is a small, tight community. Don’t burn bridges. You never know when you may need to cross them again.

ABOUT THE JOB

- This job, at its core, is about caring, crying, listening, laughing, and loving people. The number-one job requirement is excellent people skills and exceptional customer service. You also need a real passion for nails and a desire to please clients.

- Don’t go into this business thinking it’s a way to make quick money. You have to be willing to pay your dues by being in the salon possibly for hours without clients. You need to be there for walk-ins, last-minute calls, or clients who want an add-on nail appointment while they’re in the salon for a hair appointment. There may be days when you go to the salon for hours and never work on a client, which means you may not make any money that day. It can take two or more years to build a solid book.

- Success is a risk, not a guarantee, and your success depends on you. Don’t rely on a salon owner to build your clientele. In a business where you provide one-on-one services to your clients, you’ll build your reputation — and loyalty among your clientele — one person at a time.

- Understand your value. Don’t expect to be hired out of school earning 50%+ commission. A salon owner needs a nail tech with clients and experience. If you don’t bring that to the table, expect to be paid at a lower commission until you’ve earned the top-level commission rate.

- When you’re building your clientele, don’t look at your schedule as a block of “set” hours. Be flexible; if it’s possible, though inconvenient (you thought you had a break to pick up groceries), accommodate clients’ schedules.

- Pound the pavement: Go out daily — to banks, real estate offices, schools, gyms, etc. — seeking new clients. Clients are not going to seek you out in the beginning. You can use social media to offer deals to friends and followers, but if you don’t have an audience to talk to yet, it’s not likely to work as well as introducing yourself, showing off your own nails, and handing out your card.

- Find a salon with a culture that values education. Ask how education can be included in a pay package or used as a reward or incentive. Even after graduating, you may need additional classes and on-the-job training. Commit to learning all you can about what’s happening in the industry, better ways to run a business, and how to improve your skills and technique.

- Find a mentor. This may be difficult, but it’s not impossible. Many successful nail techs will be willing to help you learn, but don’t expect it to be a one-way relationship. If you can’t afford to pay for her time, offer a service instead: run errands, clean her salon, answer phones, etc. If someone is willing to share what she has (skills and knowledge), be ready to share what you have (time).

- Even outside the salon, dress like you already work in the salon industry. You don’t have to spend a lot of money, but be fashionable. Always have your hair, makeup, fingernails, and toenails done. You are your best advertisement. No one wants to go to a nail tech who doesn’t take care of herself.

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- Persevere. Don’t let the frustration cause you to quit. Have patience and realize your skills won’t develop overnight. It takes lots of time and lots of practice. Part of preparing yourself for clients is finding the confidence to believe in yourself.

- Practice, practice, practice.

Thanks to Samantha Hanby, Maisie Dunbar, and Melodie Hand for giving their advice to potential techs.