

RIGHT JOB, RIGHT TECHNICIAN, RIGHT TIME

IS IT TIME TO TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT AUTO DISPATCH?

PART 1 OF A SERIES

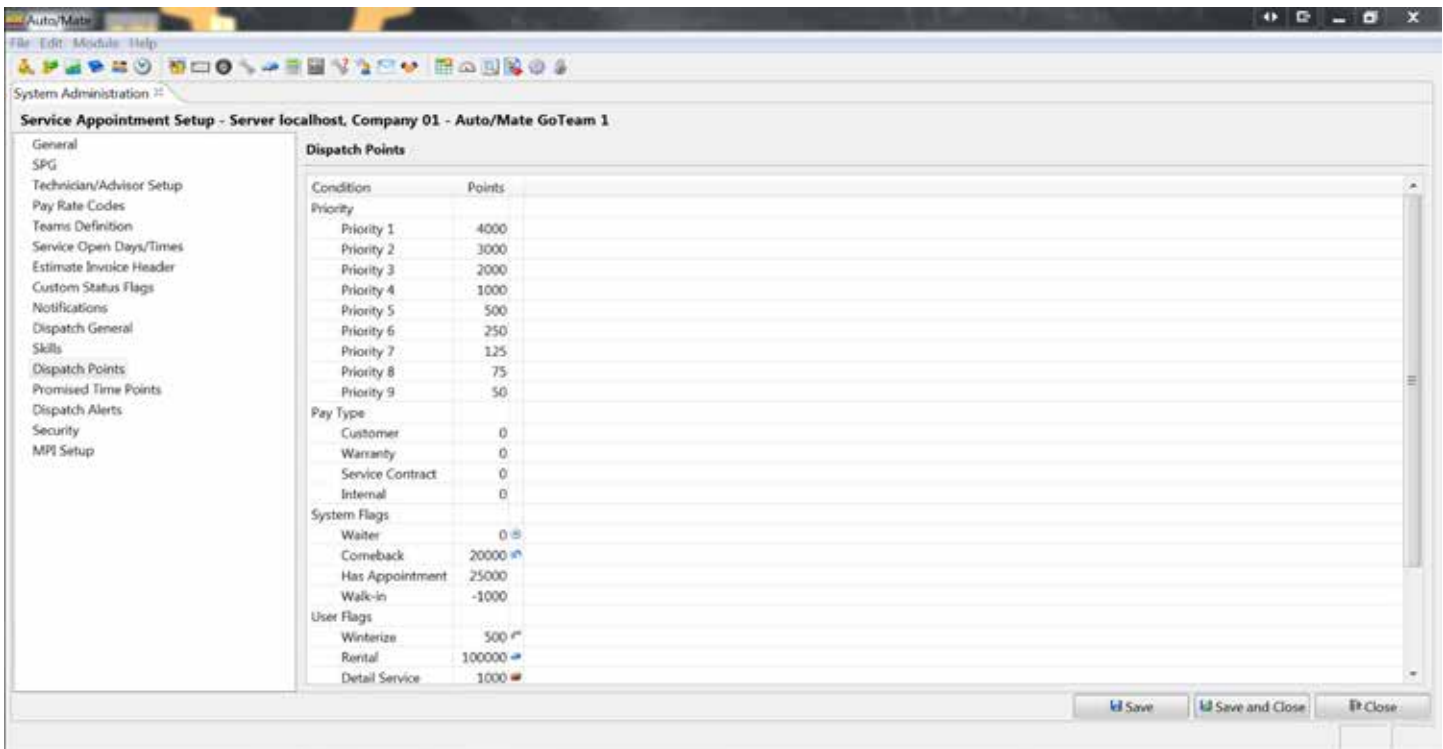
BY LARRY COLSON

You've got the finest, best-trained Technicians around. You've purchased and installed some expensive diagnostic machines. Your Parts Manager always has what you need in inventory and you've optimized the process of getting Parts to your Technicians. Tech efficiency ratings are the best in your 20 Group. (Heck -- they would be the best in most 20 Groups.) Yet you've still got more work than you can handle and your Dealer Principal keeps asking for you to do more with what you have. Sound familiar?

This might sound more like a fantasy -- all except for that part about the pressure from your Dealer to move more work through your shop. In response to this pressure, Service Managers are constantly on the lookout for ways to get more efficient. If you're not already using an automated job dispatch system that's integrated with your DMS, or if you're using one but you're not happy with how it's working, now may be the perfect time to take another look.

The basic concept of auto dispatch is pretty straightforward. It's all about getting **the right job to the right Technician at the right time.**





dispatch systems have two major functions. First, they allow skills such as 'brakes', 'electrical' and 'engine' to be assigned to both Technicians and job lines. These skills are typically customized by the Service Manager and are defined to whatever level of specificity is desired. Second, the dispatch system will provide some method of allowing one job line or RO to be prioritized against all the others. The priorities are defined by the user with attributes such as 'RO Create Time,' 'Promised Time,' 'VIP,' 'Waiter,' 'Come Back,' 'Appointment,' or 'Walk-In,' used to help prioritize the order in which jobs should be dispatched.

Armed with all this data, when a Technician asks for work, the computer determines a list of possible jobs that the Technician has the skills to do. It then eliminates certain ineligible jobs, such as jobs on cars that are currently being worked on by someone else, or jobs that are on hold. Finally, it sorts those jobs based on the attributes mentioned above and voila – the "best" job is the one at the top of the list. Simple.

Simple, except that it's not. Due to the many setup options, sometimes the system does exactly what you told it to do,

but not what you want it to do, given the conditions in your shop right now. And unless your technicians are the perfect choirboys from the Service shop mentioned at the beginning of this article, they'll be constantly searching for ways to game the system. Because of this, some Service Managers try auto dispatch but give up on it, while some others simply never try it, afraid they'll lose control of their shop.

Is Dispatching an Art or a Science?

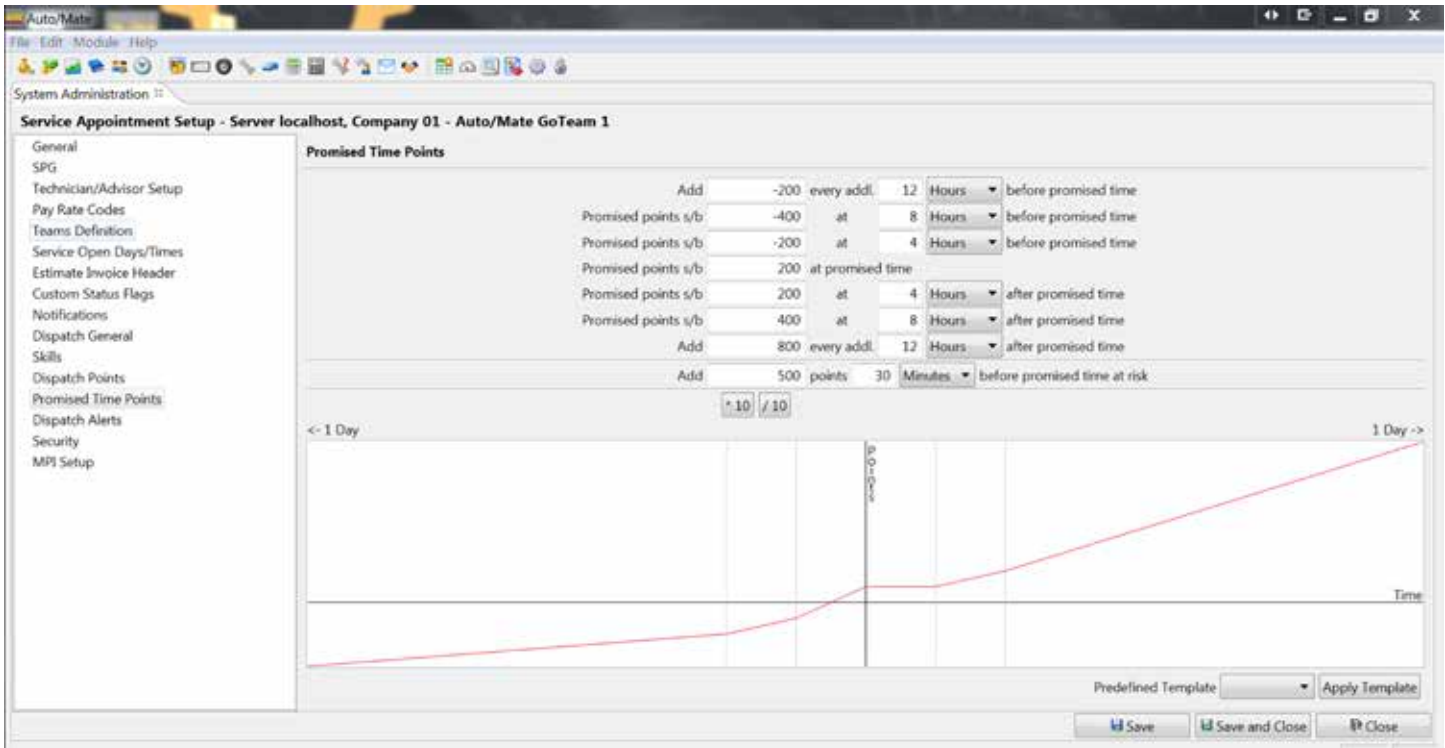
Most dispatchers will tell you that dispatching is an art, yet with a computerized auto dispatch system, we're specifically trying to make it a science. They can't both be true, can they?

The reality is that most of the time, it's a science. The artistry usually comes into play in two circumstances. One is in truly unusual situations, when the creativity of the human mind is required to overcome a unique circumstance. The other is when the "science" rules have been bent, ignored or misapplied, and the resulting situation just appears to be unique and difficult. Proper definition of the rules and proper application of those rules will naturally lead to conditions when "artistry" is needed far less often and that's when the efficiency starts.

Just a little KISS

The biggest mistake made by first-time users of auto dispatch is to over-complicate the setup. Modern auto dispatch systems have many options and it's tempting to want to use them all, but it's important to resist, at least at first. The more complicated the setups, the more likely it is that they will interact in strange ways, yielding unintended consequences. Overcomplicated setups make the system seem buggier than northern Minnesota in the summer after a wet spring, but it's probably doing exactly what you told it to do. Regardless, it's infuriating, and can make you want to throw the computer out the window -- right after you throw out the salesman who sold it to you.

The KISS (Keep it Simple Stupid) concept ought to be your guiding principle when first setting up a new auto dispatch system. Start small. It's not a bad idea to start with only 'Waiter' and 'RO Create Time' being the main attributes to determine job ordering. Set that up and see how things go. Tweak it if your waiters have too much or too little priority, but barring catastrophe, do your best to be patient. Don't change too much too fast. After a week or so, you might add in



some user-selected priority value. Your system might have a 'VIP' flag or a 'Priority' value, both of which would be selected by the Service Advisor when the appointment is created and / or when the repair order is written up. However, be prepared for situations when priority is incorrectly used. If everything is important (e.g. Priority 1), then nothing is important, a concept that we in the computer world call GIGO – Garbage In, Garbage Out.

For skill setup, you can be a little more creative, but try not to get too crazy. A good rule of thumb is that eight to twenty skills for a normal shop is somewhere in the ballpark of the right number of distinct skills. Depending on your specific circumstances, such as number of OEMs you typically service or if you have a truck shop, it may be convenient to define more. The more granular the skill and the fewer technicians that have that granular skill, the harder it will be for the dispatch system to find a tech for a particular job at a particular time.

With a little persistence and customization to your shop's needs, auto dispatch can boost productivity and ensure that

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the right techs are working on the right jobs, which ultimately helps to boost customer satisfaction and retention levels. For Service Managers who are hesitant about making the switch, the best recommendation is to start slow and monitor how jobs are being dispatched, making small adjustments when necessary. When you're comfortable, then you can take it to the next level.

In Part 2 of this series in the next issue of Fixed Ops, we'll discuss: Care and Feeding, Handling Special Circumstances and Cherry Picking.



Lary Colson has 30 years of software development experience in the insurance, real estate and auto dealership markets. He leads the Fixed Operations software development team at Albany, New York-based Auto/Mate and loves creating software that makes dealerships work better. And yes -- he's a bit of a nerd.

Sadly, as gross profit has withered, so has the sales force. Many of the highly capable Sales professionals that used to flourish in the car business have taken positions in more lucrative industries, leaving managers with the arduous task of finding and training a fresh Sales team on how to effectively build value into what they sell and hold on to as much profit as possible.

In this new environment, selling aftermarket products to increase profits has become even more challenging. Teaching people how to build value into the cars and the service after the sale, along with vehicle product knowledge and closing techniques, is hard enough. Adding the skills needed to find the right time to introduce accessories and the ability to build value into each of them only makes the task that much more difficult. As a result, often very little training goes into this part of the sale and penetration rates suffer.

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