



The 2026 Service Manager Market: Holding the Dealership Together

By Scott Cullen

Service managers do far more than supervise technicians. They balance profitability, customer satisfaction, and evolving technologies within increasingly complex service organizations.

For many dealership owners, success begins with sales. Sales reps generate revenue, open new accounts, and create opportunities for growth. But after the contract is signed and the equipment is installed, service largely determines whether the customer renews, recommends the dealership, or looks elsewhere. Behind that effort is the service manager.

It's a role that rarely draws the same attention as sales leadership, yet it touches nearly every aspect of dealership operations. Service managers are expected to keep technicians productive, customers satisfied, service departments profitable, and dealership owners informed, all while adapting to an industry that continues to evolve through managed IT services, cybersecurity, AI, remote monitoring, and increasingly sophisticated office technology solutions.

"The service manager is the person stuck in the middle," observed Paul Schwartz, president of Copier Careers. "They have to support what's sold, and then they have to do it profitably."

That statement may best capture why recruiting exceptional service managers has become one of the office technology industry's greatest leadership challenges. Service managers aren't just managing technicians. They're managing complexity.

Far More Than Managing Service Calls

Ask Schwartz and Managing Director Jessica Crowley how the role has changed over the past decade, and neither points first to office technology or more sophisticated diagnostic software. Instead, they describe a position that has steadily become broader, more strategic, and more demanding.

Like the dealership itself, the service manager's responsibilities have expanded alongside the industry's evolution. As dealerships diversify into managed IT services, software solutions, cybersecurity offerings, and workflow technologies, service managers must understand far more than traditional equipment service.

"The role has to change and adapt to it," Crowley explained. "Just like the industry has had to evolve and change with what our clients are selling."

That evolution extends well beyond technical knowledge. Service managers increasingly balance operational performance with financial accountability. They're expected to understand departmental metrics, monitor profitability, and contribute to broader business decisions in ways that weren't always part of the role.

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At the same time, tighter margins and rising labor costs mean many service managers are paying closer attention to the business side of their departments. "They're more than ever having to work on the P&L side of their position," Schwartz noted. "Margins are getting tighter, expenses are rising, and wage inflation is a real thing."

Technology Is a Tool and a Challenge

Advances in remote monitoring, predictive maintenance, artificial intelligence, and data analytics have certainly made service departments more sophisticated. But have they made the service manager's job easier? Not necessarily. Instead, technology has introduced a new challenge: determining which information actually matters.

"It's a mixed bag," Schwartz opined. "You can track more metrics and see more of what's going on. We're going through this ourselves, asking how AI can help us and how much of AI is a distraction."

Having access to more information isn't automatically beneficial if managers can't distinguish meaningful insights from unnecessary data. "It can give you more data to look at," continued Schwartz, "but is the data relevant? Is it applicable? That's all sorting itself out."

Communication Is the Defining Skill

Given the increasingly technical nature of today's office technology industry, it would be easy to assume that technical expertise tops every dealership owner's wish list when hiring a service manager. Crowley sees it differently.

Asked what separates an average service manager from an exceptional one, her answer wasn't certifications, software knowledge, or years of experience. "Communication is probably one of the biggest things," she said, pointing not only to interactions with dealership leadership but also to how service managers communicate with the technicians they lead.

Exceptional service managers go beyond assigning tasks; they focus on building relationships, actively listening, coaching their team, and aligning technicians with management.

Crowley is particularly impressed by leaders who schedule regular one-on-one conversations with every team member. "If you're at the VP level and I hear that they meet with every employee once a quarter to make sure they're on the path they want to be on, that's extremely impressive," she said.

In an industry where experienced technicians remain difficult to recruit and even harder to replace, those conversations may be just as valuable as any technical training program.

More Than a Technician's Supervisor

One theme emerged repeatedly in the conversation: service managers are increasingly expected to think strategically rather than simply react operationally. Crowley described successful candidates as those who look beyond the day's service calls and focus on the bigger picture.

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That means considering growth, sales alignment, operational improvements, and profitability. These criteria often determine whether dealerships simply maintain their customer base or grow it successfully. That strategic perspective also shapes how Copier Careers approaches service manager searches. One dealership may need someone experienced in managed services, while another may need a leader who can build policies, procedures, and performance metrics from the ground up.

If a dealership lacks meaningful performance metrics, Crowley looks for candidates who have already helped build data-driven service organizations elsewhere. Often, that means presenting candidates whose previous departments were significantly larger than the hiring dealership's current operation, providing firsthand experience managing organizational growth.

A Role That Holds Everything Together

Perhaps the most revealing part of the conversation came when discussing the everyday pressures service managers face. Most dealership leaders face competing priorities. Few face as many at once.

Service managers must balance customer expectations, sales commitments, technician workloads, and ownership's profitability goals. Bottom line, they're accountable to almost everyone. Indeed, ownership expects results, sales expects support, customers expect responsiveness, and service technicians expect leadership. "A lot ends up on their plate," said Schwartz. "Very often in these organizations, they don't really get the total respect that they're due. They kind of do keep it all glued together."

That may be the clearest explanation of why exceptional service managers have become so valuable and why replacing one is rarely as simple as filling a slot on an organizational chart.

Leadership Isn't an Automatic Promotion

For many dealerships, promoting a high-performing technician to management seems the next logical step. After all, who better to lead a service department than someone who has spent years troubleshooting equipment, resolving customer issues, and earning the respect of fellow technicians? Yet the reality is more nuanced.

"Yes and no," Crowley said when asked whether promoting the dealership's best technician remains the most common path to becoming a service manager.

Internal promotions certainly have advantages. They demonstrate that employees can build long-term careers within the organization, reinforce loyalty, and improve morale by showing technicians there's a path beyond the field.

But technical expertise alone doesn't automatically translate into leadership. Successful dealerships often begin preparing future managers long before a promotion is available. Crowley described dealerships that prepare future managers through onboarding duties, leadership training, mentoring, and special projects before promoting them. These experiences help prospective managers develop communication and leadership skills while they remain in technical roles.

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At other times, looking outside the dealership makes more sense. Competitors may already have individuals who have successfully managed larger service organizations or have navigated challenges the hiring dealership has yet to face. In those situations, outside experience can accelerate growth and introduce new ideas.

The question isn't whether internal or external candidates are better; it's whether the individual has already demonstrated the leadership skills service departments require.

Why Great Service Managers Leave

Like most professionals in the office technology industry, service managers don't usually start looking for new opportunities on a whim. Burnout, unrealistic workloads, limited authority, technician shortages, and conflicts with ownership all contribute.

However, Crowley pointed to another factor that sometimes receives less attention: budget constraints. When dealerships don't invest in the personnel, training, software, or operational resources necessary for the department to succeed, even experienced leaders eventually become frustrated. "It's not being able to do what they need to do their job effectively," she explained.

Retirement is also becoming a more significant factor. While neither recruiter wanted to speculate about the average age of today's service managers, Crowley noted that many candidates have spent 15 to 20 years—or more—in the industry. Combined with rapid technological change, generational turnover is steadily reducing an already limited talent pool.

Schwartz sees Copier Careers' role extending beyond simply filling vacancies. "We help companies develop succession plans for their business by finding strong leaders to carry it forward for the next 40 years," he said.

Finding the Right Candidate Begins Before the Search

Ironically, one of the biggest recruiting mistakes often happens before a recruiter even contacts a candidate. Crowley says many dealerships struggle to clearly define what success looks like.

Some organizations need someone with extensive managed services experience. Others need a leader who can create policies, establish accountability, and build performance metrics from scratch. Still others require someone with deep financial expertise who can improve profitability while maintaining customer satisfaction.

Those are very different jobs, even though they all carry the same title. That's one reason Crowley increasingly encourages clients to ask senior candidates to present a business plan during the interview process.

Rather than relying on general discussions of leadership philosophy, dealerships can assess how candidates would approach the position. Equally important are measurable accomplishments.

- How did they improve profitability?
- How did they increase productivity?
- How did they implement new technologies?
- How did they strengthen technician performance?

The key is the department's overall performance because, as Crowley noted, "the buck stops with them."

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Technician Retention Begins with the Manager

Although service managers oversee operations, their greatest long-term influence may be on something less tangible: technician retention. "It's huge," Crowley said when asked about service managers' influence on whether technicians stay with a dealership. "It's probably the biggest reason a technician will succeed or feel the need to look for a new opportunity."

Schwartz echoed a familiar management principle, one he referenced in our analysis of sales managers. "People don't resign their job; they resign their manager."

That observation reinforces why communication emerged repeatedly throughout the interview as the single most important characteristic of successful service leaders. Technical expertise may earn credibility, but leadership determines whether talented technicians choose to stay.

Employment Pool or Puddle?

Finding qualified service managers has never been easy. Today, it may be one of the industry's most difficult recruiting assignments. Unlike sales representatives or service technicians, each dealership employs relatively few service managers. "If we're starting to talk about people who have been in this role for 10 years or more, then, if you start doing the math, there are very few of these people available," emphasized Schwartz.

He added, "We can identify the candidates quickly. The question always comes down to whether they're willing to look at a change."

That's where relationships and timing become critical. Crowley described candidates who declined opportunities years earlier because the timing wasn't right, only to become interested later when circumstances within their current organization changed.

That's not uncommon across the office technology dealer landscape. Sometimes a company is acquired. Sometimes responsibilities change. Sometimes an opportunity arises that better aligns with a candidate's long-term goals.

Recruiting, Schwartz likes to remind his team, is built on "talent, luck, and endurance." The recruiters can identify outstanding candidates. They can build trust over many years. They can recognize the right opportunity. But no recruiter can manufacture perfect timing.

Schwartz recalled a phrase describing the employment pool that has become something of a Copier Careers mantra going back to the COVID years. "It isn't a pool anymore," he said. "It's an employment puddle."

Looking Toward 2027

The challenge of finding qualified service managers isn't likely to ease anytime soon. If anything, Schwartz expects competition for proven service leadership to intensify. "If anything, it's getting more competitive for employers to find quality candidates and entice them because the pool keeps shrinking," he said. "Client demand is increasing, while supply is decreasing."

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As office technology dealerships continue to expand into software, managed IT services, workflow automation, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and other technologies, the service manager's role will likely become even more strategic.

Schwartz and Crowley believe future leaders must commit themselves to continuous learning, not just technically, but financially and managerially as well. "Self-education is really, really important," emphasized Schwartz. "And that's not only on the technical side, but on the P&L side and leadership skill sets and how to manage."

Perhaps that's the biggest difference between yesterday's service manager and tomorrow's. The former managed a department, while the latter must lead a business unit.

That evolution helps explain why communication ranked ahead of technical expertise when Crowley was asked to identify the most important characteristic she sees in successful service manager candidates.

Meanwhile, technology will continue to evolve, customer expectations will continue to rise, and margins will likely remain tight. Dealerships that invest in building strong service leadership and recognize the role's strategic importance will be better positioned to retain technicians, satisfy customers, and navigate an increasingly complex marketplace.