

LOCKSMITH TRAINING



In the first issue of *The Locksmith* we ran a feature on training. Little did we realise just what a controversial subject training is amongst the locksmith community. To sort out the myth from the reality, we asked **Martin Pink** of Rapid Locksmiths to tell us what he thinks of the standard of training currently available.

Some of the so-called locksmith training sites claim that there's a national shortage of locksmiths in the UK. Some also claim that anyone can become a fully qualified locksmith after completing a two or three day course. They also claim that for a very low set up cost it is possible to earn £1,000 + per week. Pigs may fly!

There should be a law against these false claims and these obvious scams that aim to achieve little more than to relieve unsuspecting candidates of their money. Sadly, we as an industry are badly let down by our Governments who for some reason do not deem the locksmith industry as worthy or important enough to

be regulated or controlled. Consequently, it has become a free for all, rife with scams and rip offs.

The advice I give to anyone considering becoming a locksmith is, quite simply, forget it! The current overpopulated market place and the current economic climate gives the new start up realistically less than a 5% chance of survival.

Candidates need to understand that you cannot become a competent locksmith in days, weeks or even months. It really does take years.

LOCKSMITH TRAINING Continued from Page X

Candidates should view all short courses with suspicion and should exercise caution when considering investing time and money in any course or business venture. This is basic common sense.

If a company is offering to train you to become a locksmith in days, then my advice would be to treat their claims with extreme caution. If it looks too good to be true, then it probably is.

Due to the lack of any regulation, legislation and recognised qualifications within the locksmith industry, private sector training has seen alarming growth, from around 5 or 6 training companies 7 years ago to over 100 training firms today.

The harsh reality is that all of these courses are no more than an introduction to the industry. Not one of them trains you to become anywhere near a competent, skilled locksmith. Some of these courses are well presented. Some are average but by far the vast majority are very poor indeed. One thing they all have in common is that they only teach basic lock opening and very basic skills.

Basic lock opening and simple lock changes form less than 10% of the calls an average locksmith receives. As this is all most new start ups have been taught, they are therefore only able to cover around 10% of calls. However, even these basic skills take time to perfect. This is assuming they get any calls at all in the current climate. Even a small amount of lockout jobs will not always be the simple jobs they were trained to do because not all lockouts involve the simple locks they were trained to open.

If someone is determined to become a locksmith my advice is to ask some tough questions. Are you practical? Are you willing to work long hours? Are you willing to work initially for little reward? Will this work suit you and do you have the aptitude for it?

Make sure you do your research. This really is basic common sense; No one should ever consider spending a penny on a business venture without adequate research. After all it's your savings and your future that you're gambling with.

My next piece of advice to anyone determined to become a locksmith is to check out the trainers. Ask how long has the trainer traded as a locksmith? It's surprising how many so called expert trainers have never actually traded as a locksmith. Many are no more than novices themselves with less than 12 to 24 months occupational experience.

Next ask how long has the trainer been training and are they qualified?

The vast majority of trainers have limited industry experience and very few have any sort of training/teaching or assessment qualifications.

Be sure to check the trainer's reputation within the industry. This is actually very easy to do by looking at locksmith forums, trade forums and asking the leading associations, locksmiths and toolmakers for their opinions. The internet makes this very easy indeed. Reading forums such as the lockpicking101 forum provide plenty of useful information. Lots of successful start ups and also failed start ups contribute there.

Finally, avoid the trainers that make false or unrealistic claims. These could include: There's a national shortage of locksmiths. For low set up costs, you could easily be earning over £1,000 per week. You will be fully qualified as a locksmith after completing our short course. These claims are totally unrealistic and are there simply to part unsuspecting people from their money.

I said earlier that some training providers claim that there's a national shortage

of locksmiths. That isn't true but what is true is that there's a national shortage of skilled and competent locksmiths. The market is flooded with well intentioned people trading as locksmiths that in reality are poorly trained and equipped to deal with the job competently. There certainly is no shortage of people advertising as locksmiths. In fact the market is well and truly flooded with them; most areas have three times more locksmiths than work available.

LOCKSMITH TRAINING Continued from Page X



Martin Pink

No recognised vocational qualification or academic qualification exists within the UK locksmith industry, so no one can truly claim to be a qualified locksmith.

Many locksmiths are competent, some are gifted but none are qualified. The closest in the UK to a benchmark qualification in general locksmithing, is to have passed the MLA/BLI exam to become a master locksmith. This is certainly the only benchmark standard currently recognised in the UK and worldwide despite what anyone else might claim.

The ICL (Institute of Certified Locksmiths) are currently introducing an independently verified exam protocol in their specialist sector. The ALA (Auto Locksmith Association) has also introduced examinations to their benchmark standard in their specialist area.

Many non MLA/BLI, ICL or ALA members are very competent and many will be better than the exam standards set by the various associations. Many will be better and more competent locksmiths than many association members, but are often harder for the consumer to find amongst the hundreds of well intentioned but poorly skilled locksmiths listed in the phone book.

The truth is somewhat more concerning. There are simply too many people advertising themselves as a locksmith for the work available in most areas of the UK. It is not unusual for new start ups to receive less than five enquiries a month from their local advertising. Very few of these will be basic lock outs - which is all most are trained in. The simple truth is that not enough call out work exists for most of the firms advertising as locksmiths to survive.

Some training courses claim that after completing their training, locksmiths can comfortably earn well in excess of £1000 per week. The reality is very different.

Established specialist locksmiths can earn this sort of figure but only if they are fully competent in a range of disciplines, can afford large advertising budgets, carry extensive stock holdings and are prepared to put in long hours and travelling.

Many new start ups that don't have years of experience or adequate training and investment will probably not even make 10% of this figure. The odd one will do ok; the vast majority will suffer and struggle to even make a living wage.

The reality is that no new start up should expect to make a living wage in their first 12 to 24 months. The only people these days making the big money are the trainers and the suppliers who supply the start up stocks and tools.

Very few business start ups make money in their first few years and the locksmith industry is no different. Sadly, the vast majority of those training to become a locksmith fail. Some don't even start up. Some start up and fail and only a few committed, forward thinking and lucky ones survive their first year. The majority of new start ups fail for the same reasons. The current economic climate, an over saturated market place, a lack of work, inadequate or poor training, insufficient investment, inadequate business acumen and inadequate initial research.

If this easy money was as easily achievable as many say, we would all drive Bentleys and those training wouldn't bother as they would be cleaning up working as a locksmith. The truth is that far more money exists in training well intentioned dreamers hoping for an easy life making easy money. If it was as easy as pay a few hundred pounds, take a short training course and earn more money than a doctor, then doctors would be doing it!

LOCKSMITH TRAINING Continued from Page X

More often than not, the consumer is the real loser. Surely they have the right, when calling on the services of a locksmith, to expect a skilled and knowledgeable tradesman? One who can correctly advise them and carry out all works to a competent and high standard - one that complies with current building and fire regulations, current British standards and insurer requirements. They also have the right to be charged a fair price.

The truth is that far too many consumers suffer at the hands of well intentioned but poorly trained locksmiths. Many of these only have a few days training, no real idea of current regulations and standards and are often over priced as working for rogue nationals.

Good, bad and rogue locksmiths can be found in every association or group and in every sector of the industry. Excellent locksmiths exist both in and out of the main associations, but sadly the good non-association locksmiths are vastly outnumbered by the well intentioned but poorly trained and equipped locksmiths.

But the one thing we all have in common is that whatever type we are, not one of us is a qualified locksmith as no recognised qualifications exist.

The locksmith industry is vast and encompasses many specialist areas. Very few can claim to have mastered them all. Specialist areas include; general locksmiths, opening/entry specialists, access control specialists, auto specialists,

safe specialists and bench specialists. Each of these will have their own sub categories.

A general locksmith is a jack of all trades. To be skilled in these specialist areas, a general locksmith will, as a bare minimum, need to be familiar with a variety of skills including; lock opening, lock fitting, lock and safe servicing, key cutting, general carpentry, Upvc fitting - repair and servicing, basic welding, basic electrics and bench skills. A thorough product knowledge and thorough knowledge of current standards and regulations is also important.

It is obvious that these skills cannot be learnt and a level of competence achieved in days, weeks or even months. My own opinion is that - considering every person's aptitude and ability is different, it will take between two and five years to become competent as a general locksmith. As the industry, the standards, regulations and products are constantly changing, it takes a lifetime to remain competent.

To gain this competence, many new start ups believe it is acceptable to learn by their mistakes. The only problem is that in most cases, it is at the unsuspecting consumers cost. For example, a poorly trained locksmith may drill a Upvc door he really should have picked open. He will happily charge for the extra time taken and for the expensive gearbox and strip replacements. His lack of competence makes the job up to five times more expensive.

LOCKSMITH TRAINING Continued from Page X



Martin Pink

I believe if you advertise yourself as a tradesman and charge accordingly, you should be competent. If not, you should be prepared to make good at your own cost. Some do, but the majority don't. They simply say: "well you have to learn somewhere. Surely it's ok to make mistakes whilst learning." I don't agree. Why should the consumer pay for a lack of competence?

Such a lack of competence wouldn't be acceptable in other regulated industries. Take the following example: "You take your car into a garage for new brake pads and you're quoted £100 and told you car will be ready at 2 o'clock. You return at 2 o'clock to be presented with a bill for £300. You question this. The mechanic tells you that they let the trainee take on the job as he has to learn somewhere. Unfortunately he made an error and damaged the discs, so these all had to be replaced, which is why the bill is now £300. But all's well now and he's learnt by his mistake. Is it card or cash sir? "

How many would pay this and agree with it? How many of the locksmiths learning on the door would happily put up with this? Not many I bet.

But not all the blame can be put at the well intentioned but poorly trained locksmith's door. He attempts his jobs with all the best intentions. He simply believes and follows what he was taught on his training course. There is no legislation or regulation requiring a minimum trading standard or a minimum training standard.

So it's not just the poorly trained but well intentioned locksmiths fault. It's the fault of the trainers too. But most of all it's the fault of the government and the system. It's this that has let down the trainee and the consumer in allowing this situation to happen in the first place.

I have already listed what I consider to be the basic minimum skills a general locksmith needs to learn to become reasonably competent. Most of the locksmith courses available only teach basic lock opening. Many candidates set up as a locksmith without adequate product knowledge and even a basic knowledge of current regulations and standards. They lack even the minimum skills required to be a locksmith. They are potentially an accident waiting to happen.

The sad truth is that training companies that claim to train someone as a locksmith are badly letting down the candidate, the consumer and the industry. There would be less bad feeling towards trainers if they were honest in their advertising and told candidates the truth about what their training covers and what additional training is required.

LOCKSMITH TRAINING Continued from Page X

This coupled with a true indication of the time frame required to practice and become competent, the true investment levels required and the true state of the UK locksmith market and their likelihood of success within it, would at least give candidates the chance to make an informed decision. If training companies did this then I'm sure there would be a lot less bad feeling. It would also mean that a lot less people would enter the profession which I guess would be bad for their money generating business. So it's unlikely to ever happen unless forced through legislation.

There's no doubt that many excellent and highly competent locksmiths began their careers taking some of the short courses on offer. However, I believe any successes are largely down to the individuals, their own drive, determination, business acumen and correct research forming proper realistic business plans. Sadly though, the successes are vastly outnumbered by the failures!

Now let's look at the training situation in the UK. Let's say for arguments sake that there are 100 trainers advertising start up training courses. If we say, very conservatively, that they only train 30 novices a year each, that would equate to 3,000 new start ups per annum. I don't know of any industry that could cope with this many new businesses each year. 3,000 new start ups a year in an already over saturated market place and given the current economic climate is not feasible. Consider also their actual lack of knowledge, skill and competence, the inadequate investment on tools, stock and advertising, along with the fact that there is a real lack of work for those already trading, and it doesn't paint a pretty picture.

The harsh reality is that of the 3,000 trainees, perhaps only 2,000 will get around to having a go. Then only 1,500 of these will actually set up and invest. Of these only 150 will survive their first 12 months and of then perhaps only 50 will make even a meagre living. So is it surprising that many of these failed locksmiths spot the lucrative money to be made from training and set themselves up as trainers?

I estimate the real cost of starting up as a locksmith and giving you a reasonable chance of success requires an investment of around £20,000. This includes adequate training, vehicle, stock, equipment, tools, marketing budget, insurances and professional fees. If you ask most people who've have made it as working locksmiths, I'm sure they would agree with these figures.

Poor and inadequate training has several serious and far reaching consequences. Consumers can end up being ripped off and left non compliant. The trainee's dreams can be shattered and they can suffer financially. Established locksmiths lay off staff and stop bringing apprentices through. True locksmith skills and competences get diluted as apprenticeships and staff training ceases to exist. The whole industry suffers except for the trainers, the suppliers selling start up stock and the less reputable franchise operations.

I believe that the locksmith industry should be regulated. But this is easier said than done. To get regulation the whole of industry must support it and so must public opinion. Currently the industry is too disjointed with no one working together. Locksmiths on the whole distrust each other and associations distrust each other and work against each other. To achieve proper regulation that has a chance of working, associations, bonafide groups and locksmiths must communicate. They must start working together. If not it will never happen.

To bring this in, associations must attract the good and the aspiring locksmiths. To do this they need to be far less pompous, cliquy and be more modern and welcoming. Associations should not work against each other but unify and work together as one. No single group on its own is currently capable of implementing, policing and enforcing regulation. But a unified industry would make this achievable.

If we want regulation we must join and work together to make it happen. I would love to see adequate regulation but it must be implemented correctly and fairly for all involved. It must benefit locksmiths and consumers alike.

I'd love to see trainers and training companies strictly regulated because the current situation is nothing more than a free for all. Even non locksmiths offer locksmith training and many trainers are little more than novices themselves.

There are many good trainers who are ethical and honest but they're outnumbered by the bad ones who are quite simply out for all they can get.

LOCKSMITH TRAINING

 Continued from Page X

Be monitored by trading standards

If industry is regulated then so should trainers be

Should be trading and proven specialists in their field.

Locksmith trainers I believe as a minimum should;

Be specialists in their field of expertise and recognised in industry as such.

Have a minimum of 5 years occupational competence

Possess a recognised training/teaching and assessment qualification

Follow strict guidelines

Not just train anyone willing to pay

Have the best interests of the industry as whole in mind and not just lining their own pockets

Train to accepted minimum standards

Be honest and truthful in their advertising

LOCKSMITH TRAINING

Continued from Page X

If I had to advise on the best route for someone wishing to train and enter the industry as a serious career as a general locksmith, then without hesitation I would advise them to follow the MLA/BLI route to becoming a master locksmith. This is the only route that trains and tests in all relevant disciplines a general locksmith requires and in all relevant standards and regulations. For anyone wanting to follow a specialist route, I would advise the ICL or the ALA training courses for the same reasons.

The downside of these routes is that they are time consuming and more expensive than the short courses. However, they are thorough and to a high standard and so take years not days to complete.

Some of the specialist training routes available in the private sector are excellent as an alternative. But by the time you find these amongst the multitude of poor training that exists, the time frames are not that different and nor are the costs.

So, in short, my advice would be to apply common sense and don't believe all you read. Always undertake thorough research and choose a proven, tried and trusted route.