

Currency and competency

The days of allowing unqualified technicians to work on commercial vehicles, or, just as important, non-validated workshops to carry out maintenance, are over. Brian Tinham reports

Most people would be astounded to hear that individuals with few or no qualifications are legally permitted to work on passenger-carrying vehicles costing more than £250,000 and carrying up to 80 souls. And much the same goes for heavy trucks plated at 44 tonnes. So said Lloyd Mason, engineering and development manager at Arriva UK Bus, who sits on the irtec expert working group.

"A gas fitter, night club doorman and my hairdresser require a licence involving regular CPD [continuing professional development], but that's not the case for commercial vehicle technicians," he told IRTE Conference delegates. And we're talking about a parc of some 600,000 vehicles maintained by 30,000 technicians – the vast majority without updated qualifications.

So, 12 years ago irtec was developed as an independent voluntary accreditation for the growing numbers of bus, coach and HGV operators who were no longer comfortable with unqualified technicians working on their vehicles. From the outset, the licensing scheme required renewal every five years so that operators and workshops could be confident of their technicians' current competency – important, given the pace of technology. Meanwhile, for technicians themselves irtec accreditation meant formal recognition and routes for career progression.

"That's why Arriva was an early adopter, piloting the Vehicle Inspection route for bus and coach technicians," recalled Mason. "However, there were issues around the robustness of the assessment so it declined – until 2010 when irtec underwent a re-launch."

Mason reminded delegates that, in partnership with IMI, a wide-ranging consultation was carried out, and steering and expert working groups set up. These have since overseen the development of irtec and now ensure that assessments always reflect current legislation, technologies and skills requirements.

IRTEC REVITALISED

Hence irtec now comprises four levels: Service Maintenance Technician, mapped to Level 2; Inspection Technician and Advanced Service Technician, mapped at Level 3; and Master

Technician at Level 4. "Inspection Technician also now includes trailers as well as a combined bus and coach assessment, providing options across transport and meaning a wider pool of vehicles covered," stated Mason. And he reported that 5,500 technicians are now licensed across HGVs and bus and coach. "That's 24% of the technician pool," he said, adding that while it is still not good enough, the figure marks significant progress.

Turning to the benefits of irtec for operators, Mason pointed to IMI's ROI study in 2012/13, which clearly demonstrated financial rewards, as well as improvements in terms of MOT first-time



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FACT

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pass rates and a contribution to improving OCRS (Operator Compliance Risk Score).

"But irtec also encourages a culture of CPD and demonstrates a commitment to compliance that could be invaluable if you find yourself the subject of a public inquiry," he declared. And he suggested that this is one reason why irtec has seen such support in recent years, not only from the traffic commissioners, but also DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency), which continues to put its own vehicle inspectors through the irtec assessment.

It's a similar story with the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme, which has been designed to enable operators – the O licence holders – to have confidence that their maintenance providers have workshop equipment, processes, documentation and staff that benchmark favourably with the best

engineering facilities in the sector. Mason told delegates that's good for operators, but it's also good for maintenance providers. "It helps them to stand out, as they are entered under the national register, which operators turn to when they're looking for quality providers."

To date, 136 workshops have been accredited and eight bus companies have accredited workshops – and that list is growing. But Mason and many other like-minded engineers want more. For them, the choice of whether or not to pursue irtec and Workshop Accreditation boils down to three straight questions.

"Are you happy to have a 44-tonne vehicle travelling down the motorway behind you with the thought that this might have been maintained by an unqualified person? Are you happy to have your loved ones travelling on a bus or coach, which might have been maintained by an engineer that has undertaken no CPD since he or she qualified 20 years ago? Or do you want peace of mind that your maintenance subcontractor operates in an environment that has been benchmarked against the best?"

If the answers are 'no', 'no' and 'yes', then it's time to get on board. ■

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Arriva's experience

Delegates considering the irtec scheme were helped in their decision making by Ian Warr, engineering director at Arriva Bus in London. "Why did I choose to adopt irtec as the nationally recognised accreditation scheme for our engineers? Well, if Mrs Bell [senior traffic commissioner] endorses the scheme and we chose not to take her advice, and then found ourselves in a public inquiry, it would be very difficult to explain why. And DVSA [Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency] has much the same view," he said.

Just as important for him, however, was the value of future-proofing his organisation. "Quite often it is compliance-based incidents that cause you to review the skills of your engineering staff," he mused. "So, for me, the justification for irtec was also about ensuring that my technicians, who may have 20–30 years' experience, keep currency in technology and are protected in terms of compliance. I also expected performance and workshop efficiency to improve. And I would gain a strong path for CPD."

All of that matters for any organisation, whether it has just one customer – as is the case for Arriva – or, more commonly, many. Warr suggested delegates ask themselves, as he had, how do you know your engineers have got the required skills and have kept themselves up to date? "Your managers might tell you, but without a benchmark, it's all subjective. But if you jeopardise your customer relationship on compliance-based issues, it takes a long time to recover that position."

So Arriva engaged a training partner in the form of Gateshead College – which Warr said proved critical to the success of his organisation's irtec initiative. Why? Partly, because Arriva's internal training resources were inadequate for the scale of the challenge. Partly also because of the access to nationally recognised funding. But also because Arriva needed assistance with undertaking a training needs analysis and then developing a consistent approach to training. "We wanted to use that first to achieve Level 2 for all staff, and then build on that to reach Advanced Service Technician and ultimately Master Technician.

"Irtec is not a training scheme. Irtec is a means of testing currency and competency of engineering staff," explained Warr. Working with Gateshead, he said, had been a great success – to the point that Arriva has now built up its own onsite resource fully capable of offering training in its own workshops, rather than the college environment.

"We've also used irtec as a sifting mechanism for bringing new engineers into our business," stated Warr. "Prospective technicians come to us with certificates of competence that may be 25 years old. Also, they come from other transport backgrounds... So it's important to be able to test their theoretical and practical capabilities. And irtec allows us to do exactly that."