

Apprenticeships are increasingly being used as a recruiting mechanism by companies large and small in the transport sector, with irtec accreditation the ultimate accolade. Brian Tingham reports

Technician

“The country has an ongoing skills shortage, so it’s important for businesses of all sizes to step up to the plate and take on apprentices.” So says Tim Jackson, managing director at vehicle lifting specialist Totalkare. And note: he adds that this is not just about philanthropy – equipping young people with the skills they need for rewarding careers. It’s about sponsor companies investing in their own futures by growing their own talent and, on the way, doing their bit for the UK’s economy.

Totalkare is at the small end of SME, yet in 2015 funded three more apprentices for a variety of roles,

including engineering and service management. The FTA (Freight Transport Association), no less, also took on three last year, in its case through logistics firm Gist’s established four-year apprenticeship programme. Its stated objective was similar: helping to fulfil the organisation’s requirement for area engineers for its vehicle audit and inspection service.

Move up the company size scale and you find commercial vehicle rental giant Ryder recruiting 10–12 technician apprentices every year for its course with Stephenson College, in Coalville, Leicester. This four-year scheme leads to IMI/NVQ Level 3 in heavy vehicle maintenance and repair, “topped off” with an irtec licence (the Institute of Road Transport Engineers’ independent accreditation), according to Ryder learning and development manager Julie Wheeler.

Clearly, technician apprenticeships are on the rise – including among some that not so long ago would have expressed the view that they couldn’t afford them, preferring instead to attract others’ time-served employees. Why the change? Quite simply, because there are no longer enough to go round.

That’s not to say these enlightened organisations are relying solely on apprentices to fulfil their staffing needs. Most I talked to indicated that more than 75% of their recruiting requirements are still sourced through other means – mostly attracting technicians and engineers from other walks of life, such as the military.

Nevertheless, clearly apprenticeships are belatedly in growth mode. That being the case, the issue is not so much attracting the would-be talent (apprenticeships are usually massively oversubscribed) as nurturing, encouraging and ultimately retaining them – given the youthful nature of the likely cohort, as well as the investment and timeframe involved.

So it’s worth looking at what works for the truck OEMs, all of which have been doing this on a grand scale for several years, mostly training up technicians for their dealer networks but also for in-house vehicle preparation workshops. And what becomes immediately apparent is that it starts with total conviction from top management.

Take Sam Whittaker, director of customer service and operations for Mercedes-Benz Trucks in the UK.



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“Apprentices are the lifeblood of our operation. They are the starting point to delivering good people, steeped in our business, for key roles.” He’s not just saying that: when Whittaker ran Mercedes’ UK truck sales operation, he presided over a programme that saw the technician apprentice scheme effectively replicated to improve his sales resource.

“We now have our own apprentice

safety inspection or vehicle diagnostics roles. “The former need people who are balanced, reliable, like routine and have an eye for detail, while the latter need to be creative types with agile minds who relish different challenges every day. The basics are the same, but different people need different approaches and tuition to different levels.”

And for Mercedes, this attention to individuals’ strengths continues after

achieve IMI/NVQ Level 3 in heavy vehicle maintenance and repair. However, most of the OEMs’ courses are also matched to the irtec scheme, and Mercedes is currently going through the process. Why?

For Whittaker, irtec is part and parcel of both recognising and independently verifying competence. “The value of irtec is that it represents a single national standard across the industry – and that it requires recertification every five years. Vehicle engineering is always developing so irtec keeps technicians fresh: it challenges them to keep on improving.”

But there’s more. “Several customers also want the assurance that irtec accreditation brings. Also, we believe we have the best training and the best technicians bar none, but others may also say the same about theirs. Aligning our courses to irtec adds that verification – and in most cases sets us apart from the independent workshops, too. It seems like a no-brainer to me.”

And he adds that the forthcoming addition of ‘irtec Lite’ for LCVs in the 3.5–6.0 tonne bracket can only strengthen the case for technician accreditation industry wide. **TE**

training

academy at Milton Keynes,” boasts Whittaker, adding that last year saw 90 new joiners whittled down from 6,000 applicants. “We used to outsource the teaching element, but we brought it here two years ago as part of our existing training centre.” That’s another measure of the importance Mercedes-Benz attaches to its apprentice programme. And note that by 2017, Whittaker expects to be recruiting 120.

INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION

Apprentices are sent to the academy from their dealerships around the country to spend a week at a time here, staying in the ‘dry’ wing of a local hotel. They are taught vehicle engineering – mechanical, electrical, diagnostics, bodywork – from the ground up over a four-year period. “We also take our responsibility as educators very seriously, in terms of maths and English, but also the pastoral side. In many cases that’s quite relevant,” says Whittaker.

What’s more, he adds that Mercedes-Benz is acutely aware of different personalities and aptitudes, and encourages apprentices to play to their strengths – for example, moving towards

they pass out, with the real achievers being singled out for fast tracking to higher level technicians and beyond.

Incidentally, the focus on education and direction doesn’t stop at the academy doors. Whittaker says it’s just as strong at the dealerships’ and Mercedes’ own workshops. “It’s very important for apprentices to be properly coached in the workplace – including being given interesting jobs, not just routine work, in line with their latest learning. Doing so is a major influence on their likely performance and loyalty in the future – so mentors have a responsibility for almost being their guardians at work,” he advises.

Note also the importance most of the OEMs attach to their national award programmes, aimed at rewarding their highest fliers, with prestigious presentation days at equally prestigious venues. Mercedes takes that one stage further, offering savings pots that mature as newly qualified apprentices grow with the company. It also runs a technician recognition scheme open to all levels that keeps the engagement going.

What about qualifications? Well, as you’d expect, graduating apprentices

