

EXPENSIVE BUSINESS

With the array of equipment required to maintain modern commercial vehicles, does it still make sense to run in-fleet workshops?

Steve Banner finds out

Truck manufacturers and their franchised dealers are fond of claiming that it is fast becoming impossible for hauliers to look after trucks themselves. The advent of Euro 6 makes repair and maintenance so challenging that it no longer makes sense for them to invest in the diagnostics, technician training and the rest, they say. Far better to close the workshop and put everything out to a dealer under a full R&M contract.

But the popularity of universal diagnostics packages, such as Texa's Axone 4 and Delphi's DS150, suggest they may be exaggerating their case. Both can diagnose faults on mixed fleets of Euro 6 trucks, as well as earlier models, and each is available to non-franchised service and repair operations.

Nor is the up-to-date information such tools require difficult to come by, according to Alan Markworth, service manager for EMEA at Delphi. "We're an OE supplier and we work with a number of partners who help us obtain what we require," he explains.

Delphi also offers multiple system options under its DS150 package so independent workshops only need acquire the capabilities they want. Opt



for the flagship Ultimate Pack, though, and you get everything to diagnose faults on vans as well as trucks, says Markworth. "Customers receive software upgrades three times a year," he says, adding that technician training takes about a day. "That can be done online, in Warwick, or at the customer's premises. Some of our distributors train technicians on DS150, too."

What about purchase price? Diagnostic tools vary, but up to £5,000 plus the software licence and upgrades


at, say, £800 a year, is about right. Against that (and all other workshop resources) has to be balanced the cost of using your local dealership, including taking trucks to and fro. During that time they are not making money and, while MOT pass rates achieved by today's franchised dealers are impressive, ultimately it is the operator who is the O licence holder, not the dealer.

DIAGNOSTIC TRAINING

Some hauliers also need diagnostics tools capable of dealing with particular aspects of trucks and trailers - such as braking and suspension systems. Wabco is one company offering suitable packages. "Our software is just over £1,000 while the training is £190 per person per day," says sales leader Bryan Knott, who handles aftermarket trailers and off-highway vehicles. Courses last from one to three days and are held at its training centre in West Yorkshire.

Incidentally, note also that while you're still likely to need a case of diagnostic interface cables to match your mix of vehicles, systems are increasingly wireless. Stoneridge Electronics, for instance, has gone wireless with the latest version of its all-makes Optimo tachograph programming and calibration tool, aimed at calibration centres (cables are also available for working with analogue tachographs). Pre-installed apps give technicians replacing a tachograph the ability to read its data and configure the new one.

Some things change little, though. While a diagnostics capability is clearly important, most workshop tasks remain mechanical and procedural - everything from oil and filter changes to undertaking statutory inspections. So technicians also still need to get beneath vehicles safely and easily. Increasingly, that capability is provided



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by mobile column lifts, particularly where sites are short of space. And since most are now battery operated, radio coordinated and wireless, trip hazards and £500–£600 cable replacement bills are also eliminated.

Naturally, such facilities don't come free. Buy a set of four cable-less columns and it will set you back £3,000–£4,500 more than a cabled set, according to Tristan Johnston, sales and marketing manager at column lift specialist Totalkare. However, before you balk at paying the premium, remember that being sued by an employee who has tumbled over a cable and suffered a head injury is likely to be a lot more expensive. "And you don't need a three-phase supply to charge the batteries. Also, they can cope with around 20 cycles before they need charging," he says.

Cabled or cable-less, column lifts are also versatile. Majorlift, for example, can supply compatible 1.0- or 2.0-tonne capacity transmission jacks that enable a lone technician to remove a gearbox safely. And, with recruiting still difficult, improving technician productivity is now more important than ever.

But pits have their place, too, and Majorlift is also well known for its

pit jacks, again aimed at increasing productivity. The obvious risk: falling down a pit is likely to do more harm than tripping over a cable. The obvious solution: readily available safety covers and barriers must be used to mitigate hazards when pits are not in use. And note, these require far less maintenance than lifts.

GROUND WORKS

That said, anything requiring ground works is going to be expensive to install – and that applies to roller brake testers as well, important though these are today. Indeed, a roller brake tester built to the same specifications as those mandated by DVSA for an ATF (Authorised Testing Facility) will cost you around £35,000 inclusive, according to supplier Maha UK.

A far less expensive alternative for workshops strapped for budget and/or space may be portable units, such as Bowmonk's BrakeCheck. Such a unit does not have all the features of a full roller brake tester but can calculate braking efficiency by measuring deceleration from 20mph until the truck wheels come to a stop.

What about tools for assessing other high-tech vehicle equipment, such as

the radar systems fitted to today's trucks for AEBS (autonomous emergency braking systems)? Pro-Align commercial vehicle specialist Brett Hickey says it's not just about diagnostics: workshops now have more reason than ever to install vehicle alignment equipment. "Radar systems will not function properly if the wheels are out of alignment," he explains, adding that test equipment has come on in leaps and bounds.

Indeed, Pro-Align markets the Hunter wireless wheel alignment system, which can deliver readings on three axles simultaneously. This unit allows a full wheel alignment diagnosis in less than four minutes. Other advantages: align a truck's wheels correctly and both fuel consumption and tyre life improve. The less welcome news is that Pro-Align's package is priced at £14,000–£24,000 depending on precise specifications.

So does it still make sense to keep in-house workshops running, given the scale of ongoing investment required? Particularly if third party R&M specialists have already done so? If you are a fleet operator – as opposed to a small, family-owned haulage business – and if you are prepared to ramp up throughput by playing dealers at their own game, then it certainly can do. [TE](#)