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Levy payback

With the launch of the apprenticeship levy, the training landscape is changing. Now that the levy is operational, companies that have adopted a 'wait-and-see' attitude might find they need to act swiftly before a competitor steals a march.

Having visited two bus and coach training centres in the past few months, I've heard that sales enquiries are way up; the training market is booming. This should be entirely expected.

The new scheme, which came into effect in April, requires a large business to set aside 0.5% of its total wage bill for apprenticeships. It can then use that pot only for training requirements according to one of the many approved standards. In smaller businesses, the government picks up most of the apprentices' training bill.

While some companies may question whether being required to spend hard-earned cash buying training is the best investment they can make, this is an industry that has no legal baseline - there are no minimum statutory qualifications for bus technicians. So having a little more technical training must be a good thing. Even better would be requiring those students to take an irtec technician assessment at the end of the course to prove their competence.

In the bus and coach world, the relatively few existing training providers are now in a strong position: they supply in a market of increased demand.

But beyond that timescale, I wonder if the trend might not reverse as operators - particularly the large ones - start to grow their own apprentices. I say this having seen a pioneer first-hand: the Arriva London Academy in Edmonton, north London, which is profiled next month.

Chief engineer Jon Harman told *TE* that a factor in the Arriva board of directors' support for the new academy was financial. As a training provider, it receives payments for providing courses from the levy paid by the employers of its students. In other words, Arriva can (partly) counteract the effect of its own outward flow of levy spend required by law, thanks to a new revenue stream.

How long will it be, Harman wondered, before other operators' boards are asking how much of the levy they have been able to extract value from?

Will Dalrymple
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