

Rising to the top

The IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme provides an impartial assessment of the quality of dealer-affiliated and independent garages across the UK, finds Steve Banner

Putting the service and repair of your trucks, buses or coaches into the hands of a third party workshop is always something of a gamble, no matter how good its reputation. Hopefully, it will do the job to an exemplary standard. If the work it does turns out to be slipshod, however, and you have to appear before the traffic commissioner, then it will be no use blaming your maintenance provider. The TC will point out that the maintenance provider is not the O licence holder. You are.

Holding a vehicle manufacturer's franchise is at least an indication that somebody is keeping an eye on its activities. A prudent operator will seek additional reassurance, however; and that could be particularly important if the workshop is not a franchised outlet.

The best bet is to ask if the business is a member of the IRTE Workshop Accreditation scheme. Valid for three years, and renewable thereafter, accreditation means that the workshop has been thoroughly vetted by IRTE-trained qualified auditors.

Accreditation is not the preserve of big companies. Workshops of all sizes can apply to join the programme, which is also brand- and technology-neutral. Sites that look after LCVs can apply for accreditation in the same way as those that look after heavier vehicles.



For example, Essex-based non-franchised independent maintenance provider Harlow Truck Centre (HTC) obtained accreditation a year ago. Its motivation was commercial, admits managing director David Gillett. But qualifying was not too arduous, he says, because the 6,000ft² site already met most of the required standards. "We did everything we were asked to do," Gillett comments. "The only thing that was really queried was when we had last had our exhaust extraction system serviced."

HTC looks after hooklifts, skiploaders, gritters and road-sweepers as well as maintaining trucks. Gillett believes its ability to work on ancillary equipment gives it an edge over some of its rivals. That range of ability is helping to fight competition from OEM-backed repair and maintenance contracts, which drive service and repair work into franchised outlets. "After all, anybody can grease a chassis," he remarks.

Obtaining vital technical information from manufacturers and dealers is not as much of a challenge for an independent like HTC as it used to be, says Gillett. "In years past, we were faced with a closed shop," he remarks. He has a good relationship with the local franchised dealers - "we buy a lot of parts from them, which helps," he says - and HTC can contact them if it needs assistance. "A percentage of the work we're asked to do still has to be sent to a dealership though," he observes.

THE AUDIT PROCESS

Auditors examine all aspects of a workshop's activities, looking at everything from staff training records to calibration certificates for tools and equipment. Employees are likely to be quizzed about operating procedures, and questions may be asked about health and safety policies and practices, and how customer complaints are

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handled. A site manager or supervisor must be available at all times. The auditors will want to be satisfied that the workshop has all the facilities and expertise to carry out the work it claims to be able to tackle. Audits cost several hundred pounds.

Redruth, Cornwall MAN and IVECO dealership Patrick Uren Commercials has been accredited since September 2017. Operations manager Alex Thomas says: “The certificate is displayed on our office wall.” Publicising a firm’s accredited status at every opportunity makes sound commercial sense.

His motivation to undergo the audit came not from a customer, but from its supplier. “It was something that was very much driven by MAN,” he continues. “We didn’t find it all that difficult to obtain because we already have ISO 9001, so we had a lot of what was asked for in place when the auditor went through all our processes,” he says.

Although Patrick Uren services vehicles for Tesco and Sainsbury’s, Cornwall is not big-fleet or big-dealership territory. Most of the operators in the county are small and many of them run older vehicles - “we still get a few ERFs coming in,” he

remarks - and Thomas is not convinced that accreditation has brought the dealership any extra business. “So far we’ve not had anybody ask us about it,” he says. However, he takes the view that a certificate is becoming important to retain the business of the bigger fleets. Not having it might remove the garage from the consideration of compliance-conscious customers.

ONLINE LISTINGS

If a business is accredited, then it will be listed, along with its location, on the IRTE Workshop Accreditation Register (<https://is.gd/cidiwu>; IRTE is planning to add more information to the table in future). Workshops can fail their audit. If that happens, then areas needing improvement will be highlighted, and the business will be offered the opportunity to make the recommended changes before a re-test.

The list of accredited locations reads like a Who’s Who of the commercial vehicle industry, with well-known businesses on the records such as Pullman Fleet Services, WTL Truck and Van Centres (pictured below) and Hartshorne Motor Services (whose HGV technician Dave Barratt from its Walsall,

West Midlands site is pictured on p25).

Some fleet operators, including those that take on third-party work, have had their workshops accredited; that can help decrease vehicle downtime and improve their MOT pass rates, says the IRTE. It adds that its intention behind the audit scheme is to improve standards and raise awareness of operators’ needs.

Being able to demonstrate compliance to a demanding group of standards-conscious clients was a key reason why Coryton Commercials went for IRTE Workshop Accreditation, says director Ryan Green. “It’s a benefit to us,” he comments. Open 24/7 five days a week, and in a site once occupied by a Scania dealership, the Purfleet, Essex firm lists the maintenance of fuel tankers and powder tankers among its nine-bay workshop’s specialities. It holds agencies for Cobo, Emco Wheaton, Alpeco and MechTronic components, among others.

Continues Green: “Obtaining accreditation is a little bit involved, and there are a lot of areas you have to cover, but it’s not that difficult to get, and it shows among other things that your standard of administration is good.” Proper recordkeeping and the ability to prove that certain key tasks have been completed can be vitally important if the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency is looking into an O licence holder’s activities, and if Earned Recognition is to be achieved.

Sadly one thing that accreditation does not do is insulate workshops from one of the main challenges they face today: the near-constant struggle to attract and retain competent technicians. “It’s easy to get them, but not so easy to get good ones,” Gillett remarks. [IE](#)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Workshop Accreditation brochure – <https://is.gd/otemun>

Workshop Accreditation 2017 audit guidance – <https://is.gd/ucicit>

‘Irtec’s Mark of Quality’ – <https://is.gd/bemaci>

