

# Looking to the FUTURE

A panel discussion on skills took in candidate recruitment, the apprentice levy, training providers and standards of competence. Will Dalrymple listened in

**C**hairman John Eastman, SOE trustee and former fleet engineer (pictured, top left), kicked off the session by asking: "How do we replace older technicians? Is the answer apprenticeships?"

To that, Wayne Ellis, assistant engineering training manager at bus operator Arriva (pictured, top inset) responded: "Apprentices are the future. Only in the last few years has Arriva realised that our engineers are coming up to retirement age, and we've started actively recruiting. Currently we have 67 apprentices. With the introduction of the levy, we've been able to bring it [training] in-house."

Next up was Philip Marsh, CEO of S&B Automotive Academy (pictured, lower inset). He added: "There's been a lot of bad press about apprenticeships lately, mainly because of all the changes; I've been in education for 20 years and there have been more changes in the last 12 months than in the past 20 years. Another difference is that 10 years ago I would have had 20 applicants for every post. This year, we're struggling to fill all of the positions. So we need to engage with schools and parents."

His comment was followed by Keith Gray, general manager of training, audits and standards, at trade association FTA (pictured opposite, p21). Gray added: "FTA has got probably 80 vehicle inspection technicians, who are field based, and

their average age is probably in the early-to-mid 50s. I think that would be the same for lorry drivers and transport managers. From a technician point of view, at least there are apprenticeship standards that they can be put through and access the levy funds."

Eastman then opened up the discussion to the audience, asking attendees about their apprentices and recruitment processes. One attendee said that his company works with Stoke College, and carries out aptitude tests and entrance interviews before even being shown a garage. Another said that his company's two annual apprentices are recruited and trained in-house by a third party organisation. A third delegate stated that a big problem his company faces is finding a suitable college as a training partner. "I fail to see how a college can train somebody when it doesn't have a garage to train them in. They just do it all on paper and screens," he complained.

Finding training providers is particularly problematic for another audience member whose fleet is widely spread around the UK. Although he praised Stoke, Manchester and Bridgwater Colleges, he stated that their geographical range does not necessarily suit his company's needs.



**"If you're running vehicles and want to have a level of comfort about your operations, perhaps you should look at irtec and Workshop Accreditation"**

John Eastman



He also shared the frustrating experience of having contracted a training provider, only to find that it had opted out mid-way through apprentice training, or changed the parameters of the qualification or the awarding body. He asked: "What do you do then? Where do you send them?"

His solution, which he shared with the group, was to fall back on the IRTE's irtec assessment for supervisors and technicians, because it is an independent measure of competence. But he added that there is no one single answer for every skills problem.

The discussion moved on to attracting potential apprentices to the commercial vehicle industry. One attendee argued that the industry should broadcast some of the technologies that are being used to potential recruits. Another stated that the fundamental problem is lack of understanding of the needs of the industry by teachers and school administrators.

Panellist Philip Marsh asked if any of the companies represented in the room offered short-term work experience. He said that S&B recently tried to find industry placements for some semi-skilled technicians, but found it very difficult. He added that S&B attends local schools'



careers fairs, and participates in professional skills development, such as CV-writing seminars and mock job interviews. "I'd encourage anyone to do that, because it's a way to speak to all of the cohort," he stated.

Then John Eastman turned to the industry's engagement with girls, and how to get them on the tools, because, he said, "that's an area where we fall dramatically behind".

Keith Gray at FTA admitted that none of its vehicle inspectors were women. But, he added, only about 3% of lorry drivers are female. A desire among candidates for flexible working might be one of the reasons, though there are many causes, he argued.

In winding up the session, John Eastman reviewed the workings of IRTE's independent assessment schemes – irtec for technicians, and Workshop Accreditation for a garage – which guarantee the competence of those entities.

At that point Keith Gray jumped in, and referred to discussions in another conference session on the DVSA's Earned Recognition compliance scheme (see p24). He said: "As a trade association, what we like about that is that it is not reinventing the wheel. In the maintenance section, 3, it mentions irtec and Workshop Accreditation as ways to demonstrate [compliance], which operators can use, either for themselves or for their providers."

Eastman augmented that point by adding: "The schemes are supported by the traffic commissioners; the DVSA is supporting them, too, because all of its inspectors are irtec-licensed. The interesting thing is that they are actually mentioned in the Guide to Roadworthiness as well. So if you're running vehicles and want to have a level of comfort about your operations, then perhaps you should look at those schemes, or one similar to them." ■

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