

# Star techs: THE NEXT GENERATION

Getting good young people to join a business and stay for the long haul often reaps rewards. John Challen finds out why many operators are looking for apprenticeships to deliver quality technicians

Ask any employer what one factor causes the biggest headache, and most will say staff. Whether it is managing, training or the recruiting process, it's an area of the business that requires a lot of time and attention.

To try to alleviate some of the variables, many transport companies have looked to apprenticeships - the ability to mould a young recruit into shape is appealing and is clearly working for some fleets. "The fundamental principles of an apprentice programme haven't changed in decades," says Nigel Benton, business development manager at S&B Automotive Academy, the Bristol-based training provider that has seen hundreds of candidates through its courses. "But the rules and funding surrounding that happening are regularly changing and can be a political football where employees and training providers sit in the middle."

For example, he explains, "Transferring from frameworks to standards was designed to get employers more involved in deciding what the requirements were for success in the apprenticeship process. Employer groups were set up to shape the form and content of the standards and to

change the way the assessment of the apprentices was happening. Previously, the assessment was work-based with some classroom assessment, but now the process is more focused on the formal exam-type assessment." The trouble is, not all of the occupational areas have moved across to standards from frameworks, so some are assessed using the old methods, meaning training providers are running two systems that encompass both methods - and employers might have apprentices on different systems.

## WHEN THE LEVY BREAKS

The Apprenticeship Levy, which came into force in April 2017, is designed to encourage employers to take ownership of the process. Previously, the training provider obtained the funding directly from the government, and then spent it on behalf of the employer. But with the levy (paid if annual payrolls total more than £3m), the employer has to contribute to a pot that it can then spend on apprenticeship training. Employers select a training provider, commission them to deliver a programme, and the provider takes the money from the pot, rather than the government department.

The introduction of the levy hasn't been easy, but operators are getting

used to it. "The numbers of apprentice starters fell off a cliff the first year the levy was introduced, but they are now recovering," says Benton.

One operator that has seen its apprentice scheme grow gradually since it took on its first recruit in 2012 is SM UK. That former apprentice - now the team leader for SM UK's division in the Midlands - started something very positive that, according to James Shippen, marketing director at SM UK, is really helping in all sorts of ways. "Because of the success of that first recruit, specifically his motivation and interest, we are getting high-quality engineers that go through our apprentice programmes and stay with us," he says. "Because we can train the apprentice from the start, we can show them the quality of work from a young age."

In addition to the four on its books at the moment, SM UK has seen ten apprentices pass through the training programme, and all of them remained with the company.

The training set-up works perfectly for SM UK, which could be why the retention rate is so high. "We have an apprentice in Doncaster who attends college one day a week and then the other four days he is paired with one of





our mobile engineers," says Shippen. "During that time, he is an assistant and limited to what he can do, but he is learning all the time."

#### MANUFACTURER-LEVEL

On a slightly larger scale, independent DAF dealer group Ford & Slater runs a scheme that has seen more than 200 candidates successfully complete the course. It typically has between 40 and 45 apprentices spread throughout 11 sites and, like SM UK, manages a high retention rate of programme finishers.

Having fine-tuned its own apprentice scheme, plans are underway to expand learning for young technicians, says Ford & Slater's group apprentice coordinator Lee Sursham. "We are in the process of developing a post-apprenticeship plan that will have continual training for our graduates to try and improve further on that retention plan through years four and five," he explains. "We want to offer ongoing additional structured training and development to help keep people with us."

As previously mentioned, managing people is a challenge, and Sursham's role was established because the service managers at individual sites were occupied with everything operationally at the dealership side. "I was tasked

with overseeing the apprenticeships solely," he says. "There are a lot of agents involved - us as a dealer group, DAF, Skillnet as the managing agent - and the City of Bristol College, which provides the training. The four entities all want something and that becomes difficult, so I have to bring them all together. I work with the manufacturer to push the programme on, I sit on the board of governors at the City of Bristol College and talk with Skillnet to get the right guys in, which is crucial for us."

One approach that has been much appreciated by the apprentices is bringing them into the decision-making process. "I involve the apprentices and have a panel of kids who meet four times a year to discuss issues we can iron out," he explains.

Ford & Slater has bolted on a number of elements to the DAF apprentice programme in the last few years. "We have our own induction programme, which includes a trip to Leyland and we let them have a full tour of the facility," says Sursham. "We have a tool allowance scheme that is unique to us, and have a monthly payment scheme for this, but KPI-checked by me. At the end of the year they are reviewed and can earn the money back, so that they can potentially have all their tools paid for. It's a good

incentive for many, and instils the fact that Ford & Slater is a company willing to invest in futures."

#### TIPS FROM THE TOP

For those who are looking to establish an apprenticeship, help is at hand from those who've already been through the process. Advises Benton: "Do your research into the current requirements placed on an employer. Each apprentice has to have a nominated mentor who is an existing member of the workforce, and that mentor is responsible for confirming the apprentice is making proper progress through the journey.

"Also, make sure you take advice from credible and experienced training providers. If not, things will come up that you might not expect - all the time invested in the beginning will pay dividends later on."

The advice from SM UK's Shippen? Back yourself. "Invest in an apprentice, because with university fees going up, we've noticed an increase in demand for places," he points out. "The appeal is that they are earning at the same time as learning, they don't incur the high fees and from our side it is an extra resource we can train up and will stay with us."

Finally, Sursham from Ford & Slater suggests matching your training provider to the size of your programme. "Go and source a good local facility, because there will be plenty of people willing to provide training.

"Internally, having someone that can support the apprentice is very important," he concludes. "The choice of person your new recruit is paired with in the workshop - who they are gaining their knowledge from - is very important. It might not always be the master technician, because they might not have the time or inclination to pass the knowledge on. Picking the right mentor is vital, because they can make or break an apprentice, and the experience could affect their future." 