

Last month, the ninth annual IRTE Skills Challenge welcomed 23 teams from 12 companies to the Bristol workshop bays of S&B Automotive Academy



GO, TEAM, GO

The 73 participants faced ten mechanical, eight electrical and four bodywork challenges, all of which were refreshed from 2018. And just like last year, the event ran tests in three categories: apprentices, qualified technicians and 'masters' – open only to previous winners.

The event's focus on encouraging engineering skills through competitive exercises remains unchanged, even though this year it welcomed three new sponsors: workshop equipment supplier Premier Pits, emission control service provider Ceramex and parts supplier Imperial Engineering.

"We are constantly striving to reinvent the challenge to keep the tests abreast of new technology," says SOE marketing manager Mike Hurst.

Indeed, the event continues to evolve. For example, S&B premiered a new test on valve clearances that had been requested by previous entrants.

And the training element of the Skills Challenge is being increased; not only does that help to put contestants at ease on the day, but also is intended to provide them with some useful information to take away. This year, two challenges – the Premier Pits BrakeMate and BAE Systems electric bus – offered a competitive exercise only after a demonstration. Also, for the first time in any Skills Challenge, judges

will send feedback on contestants' performance on most challenges after the awards ceremony. This helps them to understand the subject areas where they might benefit from additional training.

"It's not just an experience; there is some training as well," says Richard Belton, director of training and education, S&B Automotive Academy.

First Bus bodywork apprentice Michelle Wolf (pictured) can attest to that. Three years after winning the apprentice bodywork technician award, she was back in the competition, having returned to the company after a period out of the industry. Speaking during her lunch break, she says that the bodywork challenge had changed significantly – there are now online tests as well as practical ones. Her appraisal of her morning's work was mixed; getting to grips with unfamiliar tools in unfamiliar locations slowed her down, she says. "It is challenging, but it's also a confidence booster. If you do well, it's good, and you feel good. But even if you don't particularly do well, you've still learned

a lot and it's good experience. For example, I've never made one of those panels before, so that was a first for me: to learn the best way to go about it and the sequence that it needs to go in."

Also competing at the same time were technicians from National Express's bus operations, based in Dundee, Scotland and in ten depots in the West Midlands. Engineering training manager Lee Sandford says: "I think that it was on LinkedIn that I read this quote: 'If you train people, you give them the ability to leave. If you don't train them, they leave anyway.' I think that if you invest in people, you do give them the ability to go, but they choose not to. They're not just another member of staff; they become valued. And that's exactly what we're trying to achieve here."

The event was sponsored by Alexander Dennis, Allison Transmission, BAE Systems, Bridgestone, Knorr-Bremse, Shell and Teng Tools. In addition, supporters MAN Truck and Bus and DVSA provided tests and vehicles for the event. [TE](#)

