

Tach on

It's been more than three years since legislation deemed digital tachographs mandatory on all new vehicles over 3.5 tonnes. But new legislation and revisions, as well as replacements for the old analogue systems, have left operators with plenty of headaches, says John Challen

Right: Stoneridge's next generation digital tachograph: easier for drivers and technicians

Few predicted that the change in tachograph laws announced in May 2006 would be smooth, and so it proved. In the year following the legislation, the head of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) attributed poor truck sales in part to the introduction of digital tachographs. Some operators were left confused, while others were not keen to embrace the new technology.

Three and a half years later, and Graham Mays, engineering manager at Stoneridge Electronics paints quite a different picture. "We have seen fleets change over [from analogue to digital] because they realise they can better record driver activity. Many older vehicles are also being fitted with digital tachographs, because operators have now seen the benefits of recording data electronically."

The switch to digital tachographs has indeed brought these benefits, but with them have come fresh challenges around installation and calibration. Installation of the various new tachographs – typically a different unit had to be designed for every OEM fit – was the first hurdle. For example, the design of some vehicles in 2006 meant that motion sensors (required to work with the digital tachographs) could not be fitted in the gearbox. Subsequently, type approval of electronic adaptors for M1 and N1 category vehicles was realised in January 2009, when the European Commission published the



68-2009 regulation.

VOSA has since approved the use of mechanical adaptor installations, which require either the motion sensor to be located in the gearbox housing, or the use of an intermediate adaptor between the gearbox and motion sensor.

Part of the problem for tachograph technicians that brought about the introduction of the adapter was the grey area regarding where the units should be fitted. While European legislation states that the tachograph should be "in the driver's field of view", this definition



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is wide open to operators' interpretation.

"Nothing is ever likely to happen, because it is European legislation rather than UK legislation," comments Chris Dormand, from VOSA's tachograph scheme enforcement policy division. "I have asked in the past where they should be fitted, as the instructions do not clearly state an exact location," he adds. However, any resolution shouldn't cause problems, because those would be resolved between the tachograph centre and VOSA long before vehicles get to the workshop.

Faster technician training

That said, given that familiarisation with digital tachos remains key, manufacturers such as Stoneridge are now offering VOSA-approved re-certification courses to meet the standards. What's more, they are shorter: Mays explains that, by cutting out repetition across the two forms of tachograph, its course now runs to 8.5 hours, covering legislation, followed by practical analogue and digital sessions. "We are tailoring training to what operators want," he explains. "Previously, the course was a day and a half, which meant people were out of offices, and workshops were a man down for nearly two days. Now we have a one-day course, which qualifies technicians for both analogue and digital tachographs, and the operators

save on hotels, while improving their productivity by limiting time that staff are away."

Approval of this course is not the only good news to be come out of VOSA recently. Dormand has just been given the go-ahead to consult with vehicle operators and tachograph centres on deregulation of allowable fees for calibration. This development could soon lead to calibration services being offered outside normal working hours, either at weekends or in evenings. That could limit the productive time that operators' vehicles spend off the road – making even the higher rates likely to be charged for unsocial hours, very attractive.

"We have a bit of a block on people taking on tachograph work, because the fees are so small – especially when you factor in the investment of training technicians and buying the equipment," comments Dormand. With a current capped charge of £46, he argues that it is simply not worthwhile for workshops to offer the service, when standard maintenance work earns them so much more.

However, with around 30 tachograph centres having closed in the last 18 months, VOSA is now hoping to reverse that trend, thanks also to its decision to grant approval to brake testers wanting the option of offering tachograph calibrations. "We have already approved their equipment, such as the central roller in the roller brake tester to calculate the W factor," explains Dormand. And the costs involved, including training and certification, as well as upgrading facilities, is thus as low as around £6,000–10,000, compared with full installation costs of up to £70,000.

Finally, after major changes to tachograph training prior to, and during, the introduction of digital equipment, legislation for the next generation of equipment is not expected until 2011 or 2012.

This means that the Tachograph Training Centre manual, published in September 2009, is unlikely to need revision soon.

Also, the next generation is unlikely to involve major changes. New units are generally expected to feature more advanced interfaces, such as USB 2.0 instead of serial ports, and probably twin speed signals – one from the satellite navigation system or another accelerometer on the system. Dormand agrees that training needs to be adapted to suit such developments, but says a two- to three-day refresher course will cover all technicians need. **TE**

IRTE's best practice guide to tachograph compliance

To find out more about tachograph requirements and to help protect your operator's license, why not get a copy of the IRTE's 'Best Practice Guide towards Tachograph Systems Compliance', released last year?

The guide deals with the legal side of tachographs and tachograph usage, and highlights issues that may help prevent operators falling foul of the EC Driver's Hours and Tachograph Regulations, as well as the Working Time Directive.

IRTE's booklet offers valuable advice for drivers, transport managers, supervisors and traffic planners, to help them comply with the regulations – in particular EC Regulation 561/2006. It also offers tips on managing and analysing charts from analogue units and downloads from digital tachographs.

The guide can be downloaded from www.soe.org.uk or, for a hard copy, send an email to technical@soe.org.uk or telephone 020 7630 1111.



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