Measure of SUCCESS

The irtec technician qualification scheme has helped to raise standards and safety across the commercial vehicle world. Its expansion – which was never a certainty, particularly in the early days – is one of the SOE's biggest achievements

At this year's CV Show, the SOE celebrated the 10,000th irtec qualification. Over more than 15 years, the scheme has provided an independent, third party assessment of the competence of commercial vehicle technicians.

Today, the scheme has received support from all of the major truck OEMs and major operators such as Veolia and Ryder; it is now required for DVSA MOT inspectors and last year was referenced for the first time in the DVSA's Guide to Maintaining Roadworthiness. Today, its position seems assured; but it wasn't always that way. The path to success of a voluntary scheme in an unregulated industry was never going to be easy.

Former senior traffic commissioner Beverley Bell, a firm advocate of the scheme, states: "I would like to pay tribute to the relentless work that IRTE volunteers have done to bang the drum about irtec technician accreditation. In some respects it is a thankless task, but they have never given up selling irtec to the industry."

In the early 2000s, SOE did use the irtec badge to award good technical working practices in industry, as judged by David Oakley, the SOE's irtec project manager, albeit with limited resources.

Sharing his memories of Oakley is Sid Sadique, now chairman of NRG Fleet Services. "For what we tried to do, the principle was great, but the delivery was probably flawed." Sadique also recalls that in the early days the industry reacted to irtec negatively, seeing it as just another piece of unnecessary regulation.

END OF THE BEGINNING

John Parry, irtec steering committee chair, says that Oakley deserves recognition for setting up the scheme and running it for the first few years. And that was nearly the end of it, says Parry, who intervened with the board of the IRTE to relaunch the scheme some years later. "I thought it was worthwhile. It had the seeds of a sensible solution to standards across the industry," he recalls.

He should know. Parry was engineering director of Exel Logistics, one of the biggest fleets in the UK with 8,000 vehicles and 12,000 trailers. Part of his responsibilities included managing a staff of field engineers who were in turn responsible for the performance of vehicle workshops, which were outsourced. He remembers: "The potential to get it wrong was always there. In order to get some sleep, I had to know that there were sound maintenance and repair standards."

Continues Parry: "How do you make sure that someone 200 miles away is working to the standard that you want? I had a field engineering team who would audit the performance of each subcontractor regularly, looking at the workshop, the standard of maintenance and check the vehicles as they were turned out, and then report back. They probably wouldn't be able to afford that now. The compromise is to get someone else to audit them, which is irtec."

Following Parry's intervention, the scheme was relaunched, and two working groups were set up at SOE; both have persisted to this day. One is an expert working group, to make sure that the technical content is correct, and remains current as legislation and technology evolves. The other is a steering group to make sure that irtec delivery continues to meet the programme's strategic aims. Another initiative was to increase the involvement of IMI as the scheme's awarding body.

An early participant in both groups was Lloyd Mason, former engineering development manager at bus operator Arriva, who had originally heard about the scheme from his involvement in the then-IRTE industry focus groups

Left to right: Steve Schofield, IMI business development director; John Parry, chair of irtec steering committee; and Bruce McGill, SOE chief executive officer

that he joined in the 1990s. "My needs were clear: back then (and still now) as an employer we had engineers working for us who didn't have formal qualifications. They had gained their experience in a hands-on environment, learning from someone else, and although they were capable of doing a good job, they had nothing to back up their capability. For me there was a need for something like irtec to give them recognition."

Mason recalls that the content of irtec was adapted from the Level 2 and 3 technician apprenticeships of the time – to complement and sit alongside existing recognised qualifications.

What was more radical was the scheme's independence. At that time, a technician who attended an OEM training course was granted a qualification based on attendance rather than aptitude; whether or not they were paying attention, according to Parry. "Manufacturers were not inclined to fail people; it was like failing your brother," he observes.

The desire of the early volunteers to create a sustainable, cost-effective, non-profit and independent certification that aimed to be what the industry wanted, rather than what others thought was needed, still had to be market tested.

HARD WORK

Says Mason: "In the early days, it was a challenge for people like me to get it off the ground because selling it to employers was not going to be easy. First, there is no legal requirement. Second, there's a cost to achieving it. Third, if you've got it, what is the benefit? Those were the questions put to me when I met Arriva's own engineering directors." (Notwithstanding their objections, Arriva management did come round and implemented the scheme soon after.)

Both Parry and Mason credit the regulators, including Beverley Bell and her colleagues, with helping to change industry attitudes. That certainly did happen, as Bell testifies. "There was a case of an operator whom I dealt with. He had a foreign vehicle technician – that was the word he used – who was from Eastern Europe, to repair the trucks. When I asked what UK qualifications he had, he said he had none. When I asked him if he had any qualifications from his country, he said 'no'. When I asked what he repaired when he was there, he said, 'washing machines'. I said, 'That is not the same thing as repairing a commercial vehicle!' I required the operator to change his maintenance arrangements pdq – pretty damn quick."

And although Bell did promote irtec, she recalls that other contemporaneous trends in industry might also have played a role in its prospects.

"You have to remember that when I started, the MOT first-time pass rate for main dealer and manufacturer repairers was through the floor: 60-80%. For some reason people thought that was okay. What people were doing was putting the vehicle through, seeing what fails, and then fixing that. That's not very 21st century. I and my TC colleagues worked hard with the OEMs and dealers to set the bar at 95% first-time MOT pass rate. Once that message got through, it meant that people had to have technicians who had time invested, who knew what they were doing, who were accredited."

In other words, the need for improved working standards turned the industry focus on to the people actually doing the work. This personal encouragement of a neglected working group also appealed to Bell: "Often, vehicle maintenance teams in-house never had any time or investment in their own training; they never felt valued, even though they were doing a fabulous job. They might have had City and Guilds [qualification] 20 years ago. So to them, irtec was a valuable tool to invest in them. And if you don't invest in your staff, you're on a hiding to nothing."

Concludes Parry: "It's good to see that vehicle manufacturers, operators and DVSA are on the same path; they're using the same standards and appreciating the same need for technician accreditation." TE