

# Master of your own DESTINY

Becoming a master technician is the pinnacle of the irtec ladder and many transport engineers have benefited from the role. By John Challen

**T**o have the best vehicles on the road, transport fleets need the best technicians looking after those vehicles. In recent years, the irtec licensing scheme has sought to address the issue of poor maintenance and has driven the development and competence of technicians working in commercial vehicle workshops.

"The idea of irtec was for it to sit within the existing workshop structure and to address the requirements of different skill levels," explains John Parry, chair of the irtec steering group and one of the architects of the irtec scheme (see also history, [www.is.gd/ruxunu](http://www.is.gd/ruxunu)). For those not familiar with the hierarchy of the scheme, it starts with service and maintenance technicians and inspection technicians, with advanced technicians one step above. There are fewer advanced technicians and even fewer still of the position of those at the top of the ladder: master technicians.

"When everyone else in the workshop has been through the diagnostics on a vehicle and still can't find what a fault is, that's when the master technician would be consulted," explains Parry. "They are the ones with a bit of extra knowledge or skills about systems, or those who have been on the advanced courses offered by manufacturers, so therefore have the necessary experience to solve the problem."

Although introduced after the bulk of the irtec scheme, Parry says that the master technician level was always planned as something for people to aspire to. "I could visualise how I could structure a workshop - and rather than say to someone 'Do you fancy being a charge hand or shift manager?', you have a situation where you can say 'If you get to be a master technician, you get more money and responsibility!'"

## DRIVE, TRAIN

But, in a parallel to the dearth of drivers in the transport sector, there is also a lack of technicians. As Parry points out: "People talk about the driver shortage, but what people don't realise is that while you can get agency drivers for your vehicle that night, you can't pick up agency technicians at such short notice. So if there is a problem with the vehicle and it stands off the road, it's an expensive lack of activity. If you have a driver, but the truck isn't safe because you've compromised the quality of the vehicle, it's not an ideal situation to be in. We have a big issue within the industry - the quality of technicians is questionable and the age profile is also a concern; as with drivers, lots are retiring but they are not being replaced with new ones."

Advanced technicians and master technicians are specifically being sought, as, for example, only 22 of the latter have qualified via irtec accreditation since



2018. "I would like to see a greater use of master technicians and advanced technicians in the industry," says Parry, adding that he wants to see more help from the trailblazer apprenticeship scheme to help push technicians in the right direction.

"Some of the bus companies are working on it, and we have a number of people asking questions about the master technician level, so there is interest there. But the demands of a workshop are 60-70% safety inspection work, so it's understandable that that is where the bulk of the technicians will be."

## PASS MASTERS

Turning from founder to participants, a couple of master techs describe their experiences. First is Richard Williams. Now the service manager responsible for Volvo's Bury St Edmunds depot, he has been through master technician training twice - once on his employer's scheme and then later via the irtec route. "I started with Volvo in 1993 and worked my way up to master technician, before moving into a technical training role that covered the region and also centrally, facilitating the training for technicians," recalls Williams. "There was an initiative



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within Volvo to work more closely with IRTE and IMI and to make sure that all of the trainers had the right qualifications, which included master technician.

“So I went to Manchester and completed the course, which was two days of assessments to prove ourselves as competent. Part of the programme was to show that our skills were transferable, with a theory test after the initial practical evaluations.”

Although he was used to dealing with Volvo trucks, Williams was not put off by working on products from other manufacturers during the assessment. “I realised that problems with, say, data links or air brakes are similar, regardless of who made the truck,” he says. “One of the main things about the irtec qualification is that you have to think outside the box; having a wider vision on the job you are faced with is important.

“One part of the assessment was learning about a system and then communicating what you’d learned

in the role of a mentor, teaching someone who is training on the job themselves,” recalls Williams. “So as well as the practical engineering, it was clear that you have to have the right communication skills, a rapport with the people you are working with, and other attributes beyond engineering.”

Williams says that having become a master technician, there is more credibility with customers, suppliers and local businesses. “They know that if you have the right qualifications and skills, you can do the job - that gives customers peace of mind,” he says. “They want to have faith in the person working on their vehicles and know that they will look after the company’s compliance record, in terms of keeping vehicles roadworthy and trouble-free.”

Williams maintains that there is a customer-driven demand for irtec, and would be keen to see more qualified technicians passing through his doors. “If that demand from our customers means

more master technicians, then it is in our interest to go down the irtec route in order to ensure those clients are getting the service they are looking for. However, not everyone wants to be at that level, and it’s also important to recognise there are experts in different areas who might not be comfortable going through the master technician process.”

### **MAN MASTER**

Jefferson Smith is another graduate of irtec’s master technician assessment who has benefited from the qualification. Now EPLS production manager at MAN Manchester, he went on the course after MAN decided its technicians throughout the dealer network should be assessed. “I’ve seen the benefits [to the master technician grade] on both sides,” says Smith. “As a technician, it gives you a bit of a bonus and sets you apart from the others. But more recently, as an employer, I interviewed a master technician for a job here and I could relate to what he’d been through - which is partly why he got the job!”

Smith believes that more master technicians would be beneficial to the business and hopes to see more soon. “We’ve just started a new programme for the military and we had to recruit around 36 technicians. Out of the new people there’s only been one master technician,” he says. “By passing the irtec scheme I was able to move to the top level within MAN, which was only possible after becoming a master technician, so there are definitely benefits to doing it.”

But, like Williams, Smith is conscious that the academic side isn’t for everyone. “On the training course, one of the guys was the best in the country, but he almost let the pressure get to him. He came back and eventually went though with the course, but we have to appreciate that there are talented people out there who just aren’t interested.” 