

Selling hours

Next year, Scania dealer TruckEast celebrates 50 years of servicing customers in eastern England. Although the trucks have evolved, the business has not



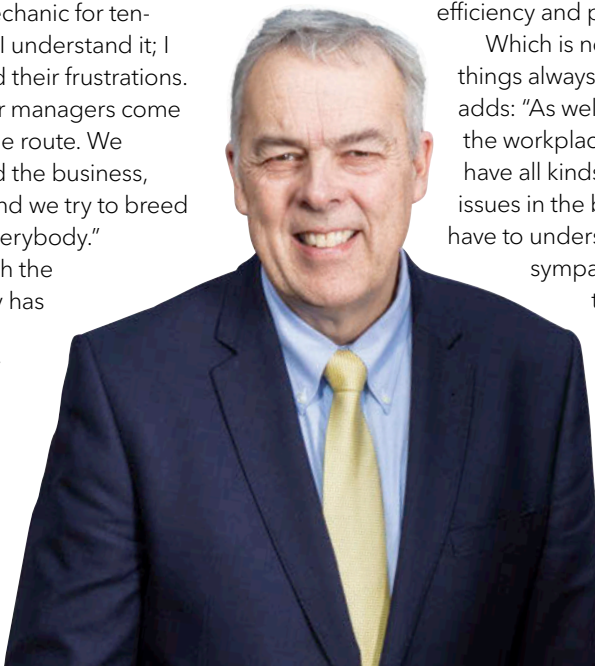
Every day, before the COVID-19 lockdown came into effect, TruckEast managing director John Biggin (pictured below) walked the floor of the workshop of the Wellingborough depot or one of the other sites, talking to the technicians and office staff.

"Walking and talking helps them feel valued, and helps us understand what their frustrations are, and what is holding the job up; why we can't deliver better service," he says.

The MD and owner of the Scania franchise for eastern England and the Midlands himself worked his way up from the shop floor, starting in the industry as an apprentice in 1977.

"I was a mechanic for ten-plus years. I understand it; I understand their frustrations. Most of our managers come up the same route. We understand the business, their job, and we try to breed that into everybody."

Although the technology has changed, particularly in terms of electronics – he recalls



it being all heavy spanner work at that time – in many ways, the model hasn't changed. "Fundamentally, the business sold hours. That's what we still do today."

He is referring to the time of the company's 180 technicians, about a third of its total workforce, who maintain some 8,000 trucks and 3,000 trailers, including dedicated VMU contracts with supermarkets ASDA and Coop.

"Technicians are key people in business," he says. In addition to Biggin's personal touch, they are monitored job-by-job: technicians start work by punching into the job, which has its own allotted time. Then the clock is ticking to finish it in the expected time. That means

that technicians are judged on their efficiency and productivity.

Which is not to say that things always go to plan. He adds: "As well as obstacles in the workplace, today people have all kinds of mental health issues in the background. We have to understand and be sympathetic and try to help them. Different people have different personal

circumstances. We have employed a couple of counsellors for the people who are struggling, and have helped people in financial difficulty. All of this stuff comes to work with them."

THE ROAD IS THEIR WORKSHOP

Outside of workshops, the dealership employs some 70 breakdown techs working out of a van, some of whom are TruckEast's most senior. By the side of the road, they change a fan belt, alternator or starter motor, for example, to keep customers moving as safely and efficiently as possible. One of them, Colin Woodcock, who works out of the Northampton depot, is an escalation technician, which means that he has received extra training from Scania and has direct links with the factory to resolve problems beyond the abilities of dealer and Scania head office staff (he also won Scania's 2017 'golden spanner' technician award).

As the roadside working environment poses so many risks and dangers, these technicians receive special training. That is on top of the nearly £1m spent last year by the dealership – £925,000 – on technical training courses, to keep expertise up to date. That translates to two to three courses on a variety of topics per person per year.



TRUCKEAST: HISTORY AND FUTURE

On 19 January 1971, a company called WW Commercials signed a franchise with Scania. It soon changed its name to Scantruck, and was sold to Robinson Trucks of Stowmarket when it got into financial difficulty in the early 1970s. The name changed again, to Ro-truck. By 2002, by which point it had depots in Witham, Felixstowe, Thetford, Kings Lynn and Ely, the business acquired neighbouring Scania dealer Derek Jones Commercials, bringing Peterborough, Wellingborough, Corby, Northampton, Crick and Milton Keynes into the group. In 2006, it was renamed TruckEast and acquired by the Biggin family the following year. Its network was broadened in 2015 with another Derek Jones business, a Corby dealership, and in 2016 with the addition of independent dealer M&K Commercials in Norwich, and in 2019 with trailer maintenance firm ST Fleet Services.

Following depot renovations in Witham in 2019 and Crick in 2019-20, Biggin is now planning a £6 million nine-bay head office in Stowmarket, relocated away from the suburbs that have grown up around it. As for Biggin, he says he plans to step down from MD in a few years, and appoint one of the existing senior team to follow him. One day his son Sam, who currently is depot manager in Ely, following an early career in manufacturing after university, might take over. Concludes Biggin: "Hopefully my son will step into these shoes. If he's good enough."

of the desks and the kind of chairs that need to be bought - "that would be different. This is really all about putting the customer first," Biggin comments.

Customer differences are responsible for the variation in effects that COVID-19 has had across the network (as of mid-May, no depots had shut). Witham in Essex has been massively hit by the lack of business, in particular from operators in the car transporter and construction sectors parking up their fleet. Felixstowe has struggled because of the reduction of port traffic. But Kings Lynn, which services a fleet of RCVs, is running almost normally, as is food-and agriculture-dominated Peterborough and Ely, and Crick, which services supermarket deliveries.

Every branch houses its own parts stockholding, managed by a dedicated parts supervisor. With access to further stock daily from Scania's UK warehouse in Hinckley, backed up from a European DC in Belgium. The total value of the dealer's parts is said to be £2.5 million, all spent in the interests of customer service, Biggin claims. "This is one thing that sets us apart from a franchise car dealer, where you'd be lucky to get a wiper blade. Our target is 95%-first-time pick for a Scania tractor unit."

When asked if HGVs are becoming commodities, Biggin laughs, and reflects: "When I first came to the Scania world, it was head and shoulders above the rest, in terms of residual value, longevity, quality - and capital price. Now the capital price has remained, but a lot of the other trucks have caught up with it since in terms of reliability. There are no bad trucks any more. Now it comes down, more and more, to aftersales and what happens after the truck has been delivered. That's the difference." **TE**

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To supplement their expertise and provide for the future, TruckEast also employs 33 apprentices. It tries to place one apprenticeship in every of its 13 depots, depending on the calibre of young people in the area. (Day release education is now split between Northampton college and the Scania/Loughborough college programme). To encourage them to stay with TruckEast the dealer group not only buys their tools but also contributes £120 per month to a savings account that they cannot access for 10 years. "Once they get through their apprenticeship, they usually stay with us for life," Biggin points out. "And obviously we pay competitively."

AWARD WINNER

Underpinned by a deep appreciation of his employees, and the business, Biggin led TruckEast last year to win Scania's dealer development award, which measures dealer groups on 10 metrics as well as depot-based measures. He says he was pleased with the award because it shows how well the dealership's values align with the brand.

"If we were dictated to by a manufacturer to do a lot of stuff that we thought was nonsense" - and here he mentions another OEM that has been pedantic to dealers about the colour