

A new qualification is being launched aimed at enabling mentors to support commercial vehicle technicians on their journey towards completing the recently-introduced IMI apprenticeship standards, reports Brian Wall

# Guiding light

Workplace mentors have been around since the dawn of time. As one generation of employees absorbed and learned the skills and knowledge required to carry out a task, they passed on those abilities to the next generation of apprentices. Hence, the abundance of talent that existed within a group was preserved through that interaction.

Yet 'learning on the job' can come at a price. Mentors often have to impart their expertise while simultaneously trying to fulfil their own workday responsibilities, often battling against tight deadlines. The process can also suffer from being unstructured and inadequately supported from above. Inevitably, mentees might find themselves having to pick up instructions at speed, or be left floundering when the mentor runs out of time and has to abandon them to their own devices.

In a move to bring greater levels of support to mentors when delivering their expertise to those who follow on, the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) has been engaging with employers and training providers to establish the need for a new qualification. This would enable mentors to support and assess commercial vehicle technicians - that is, those carrying out maintenance, servicing, inspection and overhauling major components - who are completing an apprenticeship.

The qualification - a level 3 award, 'Introduction to Peer Mentoring in the Workplace' - has been designed to develop the knowledge and skills required by a workplace peer mentor [learner], who would typically be allocated to a new employee, such as an apprentice, explains Dave Skelly, IMI awarding product specialist.

IMI develops and assesses against a range of qualifications and accreditations for training providers and colleges, including apprenticeship standards and SOE's technician standard irtec.

## RESPONSIBILITY SHIFT

When the government shifted to trailblazer apprenticeships a few years ago, the main responsibility for apprentices has shifted from training providers to employers. "While larger organisations tend to have the appropriate company structure and resources to provide the relevant staff for mentoring, some less well-resourced employers struggle to cope with the new obligations, leading training providers to highlight the need for mentor training," says Skelly. "The thinking is that an apprentice who is allocated a workplace mentor is much more likely to become part of a team and be more productive, more quickly - and more likely to be retained, if they have a positive experience."

With that in mind, IMI has developed the new qualification, with input from



Bosch, Arriva, Skillnet, Easton and Otley College, and Kent-based Mercedes-Benz dealer Sparshatt Truck and Van.

"We were able to establish a range of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and agree assessment methods that would have a positive impact for a mentor when supporting an apprentice as part of their journey up to EPA [End Point Assessment]," states Skelly. "The expectation is that this will typically benefit the apprentice, employer, training provider and automotive sector in attracting and retaining individuals. It also represents an opportunity for mentors to help deliver something that's urgently needed - a chance to give something back."

One of the catalysts for introducing the new qualification is that attracting new talent into the automotive industry has become an increasingly difficult challenge, due to an ageing workforce and the widening skills gap. "Many schools tend to push students towards university, so this sector has suffered as a result," he points out. "And yet this is a changed industry, where high-order thinking abilities are often required, so the career path for anyone joining now is a significant one as they progress."

Skelly explains how the IMI mentor



Pic credit: Tim Gander



apprentice – not just in terms of technical ability, but also the behavioural aspect. What I think this qualification will do is to give the apprentice official recognition and a sense of value – and of being valued. However, to achieve that goal, as an employer you have to give the mentor the time

and breathing space to work through things, to show commitment to the apprentice’s learning journey, without them feeling under pressure.”

As regards how apprentices are best supported at work, Arriva UK Bus had been looking at developing its own scheme for the 90-some engineering apprentices that it currently has, Lewis reveals. So the IMI’s new mentor qualification, currently in the later stages of development, has come along at just the right time, he adds. “The work Dave Skelly and the IMI have been doing will formalise some of the ideas we’ve been engaged on, so we very much welcome this.”

At the same time, the standard is uncompromising in its demands. “The qualification being proposed requires a certain level of time commitment on the part of a mentor,” he points out. That means that once the organisation implements the standard, volunteers would have to agree to that.

Lewis, who has had personal experience being a workplace mentor, also points to other more behavioural aspects of the training, particularly relating to ‘confidential issues’ that apprentices may have. “Some come from challenging backgrounds, so we want to ensure that both our mentors and apprentices are supported through that by their line manager or other appropriate person.” **TE**

## MENTOR ASSESSMENT METHODS

Competencies that a workplace mentor will be expected to demonstrate when assessing mentees under the IMI’s level 3 award ‘An Introduction to Peer Mentoring in the Workplace’ include:

- Supporting a mentee during a workplace induction
- Developing and maintaining a SMART [specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-orientated] action plan to meet with a mentee’s programme of learning and development
- Reviewing and recording the progress a mentee is making towards a SMART action plan
- Setting new and achievable objectives
- Demonstrating the skills that a mentee is expected to build up
- Selecting and effectively using appropriate resources to support a mentee
- Observing and providing feedback on the practical skills a mentee is developing

qualification would work in practice. He says: “At the start of the recruitment process of an apprentice, a workplace mentor is allocated. At this point, the training provider will highlight the roles and responsibilities of that mentor, which would include the apprenticeship training programme, as well as the assessment expectations throughout the programme of delivery [see box]. The idea is that this should be seen by the mentor as a support mechanism that enables the apprentice to make progress against set targets that are reviewed regularly between the apprentice, training provider and mentor.”

Another supporter of the changes is

John Lewis, engineering development manager at Arriva UK Bus (pictured, left). While he recognises that the age-old informal means of training has served the commercial vehicle sector well in developing new talent from the apprentice stage through to skilful technicians, he believes the time has come to validate that arrangement, without losing its unique advantages.

### CHANGING TIMES

Lewis explains: “Apprenticeships have changed fundamentally over time, so you need the right person who can deliver the right training in a way that encourages and brings on the