

HGV CONVERTS

The current shortage of skilled technicians in the heavy vehicle market is nothing new, and the pandemic is doing little to help the

situation, with some businesses loath to take on additional apprentices in such an uncertain climate. Yet an ageing workforce continues to retire, leaving workshops with increasing demand for skilled staff.

Ironically, the haulage and logistics industry is one of the few that continues to work flat-out while many sectors are furloughed or closed. Main dealers remain open in incredibly difficult operating conditions, as they keep the UK's fleet on the road and products on the supermarket shelves.

In 2019, to meet this growing shortage, Renault Trucks and its dealer network took the unusual step of creating a training route for light vehicle technicians from car and van businesses, to boost their skills and move into the heavy truck world. Renault and parent company Volvo Group worked with Leicestershire HGV training specialist Stephenson College to create a one-year conversion course from take technicians from light vehicles to heavy.

Of course, physical scale is not the only difference between cars and HGVs;

To help tackle the perennial issue of vehicle technician shortages, truck OEM Renault has begun recruiting competent technical staff from outside the truck world, and then training them up to HGV standards. Dan Gilkes explains how

trucks also tend to have pneumatic and possibly hydraulic systems that are not present on the majority of lighter vehicles. Cars are also inspected just once a year for their MOT, while a heavy truck will need a competent person to carry out an inspection every six weeks. Even the way that dealers work can be different, with few car outlets heavily involved in roadside assistance or overnight service work, while the truck dealer delivers a 24/7 service wherever it is needed.

To meet the requirements of the upskilling course, it was decided that trainees should attend a series of one-week residential training blocks at the college throughout the year. A different theme was included in each block:

- Inspection intervals and legal obligations
- Engines and emissions
- Chassis, including air brake fundamentals
- Transmission
- Product-specific electronics
- Practical diagnostic jobs required for the qualification.

The practical elements of the training were carried out using Volvo Group resources (of which Renault belongs), with specific Renault and Volvo equipment where possible.

The result for the trainees was upskilling from a light vehicle L3 qualification to achieving the L3 diploma in heavy vehicle maintenance and repair principles - IMI qualification reference: 500/9812/3.

To run the course, the college required a minimum of eight students. Renault's dealer network, both manufacturer-owned and independents, were keen to engage with the opportunity. To date three of these courses have been run; though understandably, not during the last year.

"We ran a dual-branded course initially, because of the numbers, but the second course was pretty much all Renault," says Derek Leech, service market and retail development director at Renault Trucks.

"The feedback from the trainees and from the college was really positive. The people taking part were not apprentices; they were already skilled technicians."

"The instructors were really helpful, and because all of the trainees were experienced, they all had a level of mechanical expertise that we could share"

Paul Shilton

PARTICIPANT VIEW

One of those early trainees was Paul Shilton (pictured right), a technician at the Renault Truck Centre in Nuneaton. Already a highly-skilled light vehicle technician, he was looking for a new opportunity and joined the course 18 months ago.

"It was more of a challenge than light vehicle work. I'd been doing cars and vans for 20 years, but got bored," he admits.

"Most of the other people on the course were in their 20s and 30s. You think, 'I've got to be a trainee again', but you get over that hurdle and you get more from it. The instructors were really helpful, and because all of the trainees were experienced, they all had a level of mechanical expertise that we could share."

For the first three to four months, he worked in the dealership alongside existing qualified technicians before taking on his own work under supervision. Now up to speed and qualified, Shilton has become a valued member of the RTC Nuneaton team.

For Nuneaton depot manager Kerry Curtis, the upskilling course was a worthwhile exercise. With 13 technicians and three apprentices working in the depot's busy workshop, he has recently advertised for three further technician jobs, with little success.

"We're competitive on pay, but there is a shortage at present," he said. "It's certainly an option that I would look at again in the future. Paul is one of my most competent technicians now."

There is of course a commitment from both sides, and Curtis says that it is important to find the right potential people at day one. "The selection process is key for these courses. It needs to be thought through and done correctly."

There is a financial commitment too, as the dealer has to fund the course and employ the trainee throughout the



training year. The technician, in return, commits to stay with the dealer for three years following the course, or pay back the training fee. That is why Curtis says that it is important to find the right people in the first place.

DAF IRTEC TRAINING COURSE - UPDATE

In 2019, DAF launched a pilot of a four-month intensive course to train up non-technical staff to carry out HGV vehicle safety and maintenance checks. Unlike the OEM's three-year vehicle technician apprenticeship, this scheme aims to pick up older staff working in depots who were interested in developing themselves, but lack the qualifications to work on vehicles.

DAF put two groups, a total of 15 candidates, through the initial pilot programme; 12 successfully achieved irtec accreditation, according to Adam Russell, DAF business services manager. He adds: "We had intended to put another three groups through the scheme in late 2020, but we have decided to defer this due to the implications of COVID-19."

He reports that the pressure of technician shortages on DAF dealerships has eased in the last few months, but he puts that down to COVID rather than structural changes in industry. "DAF and the DAF dealer network are always on the lookout for both qualified technicians and those joining the industry for the first time." To that end, he says that later this year its three-year apprenticeship scheme will be taking on 84 fresh faces.

"It's a two-way investment, but we want people that want to stay," states Curtis.

That said, he admits that the training fee is no more than he would have to pay an employment agency for finding a skilled technician. He adds that such services offer no commitment that the person would stay, nor a guarantee of the quality of their work. By training the technician in-house and with the college, he can be sure of the skills that are required for the depot operation.

MORE THAN A JOB

For the technician, it's not just about a job now. There is a real opportunity to grow and to see another side of the business, with the potential for further progression in future.

"You do get paid more on the heavy side, but it's not always driven by money. You also get more responsibility, as you need to be able to work rapidly to get trucks back on the road," says Shilton.

"It's a better way of life. But it's more of an achievement than anything else. I would say, if anyone is thinking about it, then go for it. It's really worth it."

Renault Trucks is currently looking to run further courses in the future, when possible, to meet the ongoing needs of its depot network. The company is also looking at the possibility of spreading the course entry base beyond light vehicle technicians. As well as taking on car and van trainees, Renault Trucks is considering other areas of the automotive and engineering world. Leech says there is huge potential, for example, in ex-military technicians, who may wish to convert to the civilian heavy vehicle market once they have left the service.

"The dealers in our network want a stable workforce," he observes. "They want to bring people into our industry. We will run courses again as soon as the demand is there and it is possible to do so." **TE**