

# Quality assurance

There is no doubt that many operators will have horror stories involving defective parts on their fleet vehicles – parts that may have caused damage to the vehicle, unexpected repair costs and even injury to the driver. Investigations of these incidents – and examinations into the defective parts – have led some in the industry to steer clear of aftermarket parts, motor factors and essentially anything that isn't original equipment.

However, that approach is sometimes not feasible. For example, OE parts may not be available immediately; they may be out of the operator's budget, or there might be issues with customer service. In which case, operators have to look elsewhere. These days, that situation is less of an issue than it used to be. Motor factors and aftermarket suppliers recognise that it is in their interests to supply quality products. Cost, quality and speed of service are all demanded by operators.

Claiming to be the UK's 'most successful and fastest-growing commercial motor factor', Digraph is one of those companies helping to shift opinions. With a network of 20 branches – and many more in the pipeline – the company's reach is pretty wide. Sites in the south include Bristol and Slough, while there are Digraph branches as far north as Leeds and Hull. Within that area, there are many other locations close to main road routes, including Peterborough, Telford, Ellesmere Port and Nottingham.

**The world of non-OE parts used to leave some operators concerned over the reliability of replacement components. However, things have changed and the aftermarket should be embraced, not feared, says John Challen**

Digraph recognises that customers expect and deserve a service that not only meets, but goes beyond the industry norm. As such, it claims to go the extra mile to ensure that they receive that service.

That sort of response is music to the ears of the likes of John Eastman, former IRTE Council chairman, who has been heavily involved in the institute's Workshop Accreditation scheme.

"The issue of parts certainly has an effect on the Workshop Accreditation audit because the question 'where do you buy your parts – OE or aftermarket?' is asked," he says. "Many operators now have stock of fast-moving parts that are sourced from motor factors. When it comes to engine or brake parts, there are a lot of suppliers who offer the same specification as the original equipment – a lot of it even comes in similar boxes to those supplied by the OE."

## **PARTS ON A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD**

While many operators will say that they use both OE and aftermarket parts, the decision of which route to go down can depend on a number of different factors. "It can depend on availability, price and also previous experience of specific parts," says Eastman. "However, if they wanted pistons or linings, I'm sure they'd go to the OE, because factors don't tend to supply those parts."

Actually judging the quality of the non-OE parts is slightly tricky, but Eastman says he can only go by the feedback from members. "From experience, over a period of time, they've found [non-OE] to have been relatively reliable, subject to a major failure other than wear and tear," says the IRTE man.

"It's sometimes a difficult question to answer, because operators might not have all the information and data on what they're buying to decide whether it is fit for purpose," he adds. "A lot of the decision-making comes down to knowledge, or having a good relationship with the supplier so they know that products will be of a similar quality to OE parts."

Eastman says there are many cases where a general improvement in the quality of parts has occurred, a good example being wheel studs on vehicles, he says. "The IRTE – and I was part of the project – did a survey of all the different suppliers, both manufacturers and OE along with alternative suppliers," he recalls. "We carried out metallurgical tests on the studs and I don't think we found more than two or three that were below the required standard. The spurious ones were weaselled out and I think as time's gone on, those companies have ceased trading because operators read our report and were

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John Eastman

more aware. Therefore, they stopped buying those particular components.”

Over time, he says, cases such as those rogue suppliers have become fewer and fewer. “The commercial vehicle repair industry is a bit like a family, so they talk to each other, and word gets about if they were having major problems,” he says.

### THE CASE FOR THE AFTERMARKET

Outside of the parts themselves, the level of service with motor factors has also improved over time, says Eastman. “The feedback I’ve had so far is a negative on major problems with aftermarket parts. Operators tend to be quite accurate with their suppliers and they get to know how often they would replace that particular component. At the moment the feedback is that they don’t see any problems with their suppliers.”

As previously mentioned, suppliers of non-OE parts have made a lot of effort to change the reputation that some in the industry have of them. As a community, they have worked hard across a number of areas to improve. Among those fighting their corner is Mark Field, chief executive of the Independent Automotive Aftermarket Federation.

“The automotive aftermarket supply chain is one of the most robust, transparent and quality-driven sectors throughout the UK,” says Field. “It is

a supply chain that has evolved over many decades and prides itself on best practice – from parts and brands selection and supply to delivery, knowledge and logistics.

“Commercial vehicle motor factors have access to the widest range of parts from both tier one and aftermarket suppliers, meaning traceability of parts and their origin is unrivalled,” he adds. “Under European block exemption regulations, automotive suppliers and motor factors supply parts of matching quality to the original equipment specification.”

One area that causes concern among operators is extended vehicle downtime caused by poor parts availability. “This is a significant under-recorded cost, which contributes to a negative influence on vehicle workshop staff,” says Field. “Furthermore, it results in trained vehicle technicians spending time chasing down parts instead of getting vehicles repaired and out of the workshop. This is where the automotive aftermarket excels

in selling quality parts for HGVs.” One example is TMD Friction, which has added new labelling features and anti-counterfeiting measures to its CV brake pads (such as pictured below).

He adds: “Automotive aftermarket businesses maximise the use of the prime manufacturing source of the vehicle parts, in the majority of cases providing significant cost savings.” Without the role the sector plays, reasons Field, a lack of consistent all-makes truck and trailer parts knowledge and expertise will lead to increased parts costs and delivery times.

“Major original equipment parts manufacturers all use motor factors to stock and distribute their products throughout the UK, and provide full warranty and technical back up to their stockists,” he continues. “Motor factors have a strong service ethos and fleet of delivery vans available for parts delivery as required, with many providing a 24-hour emergency service.

“All fleet operators have a choice of where to buy their parts – the automotive aftermarket supply chain offers a proven, reliable option that consistently provides first-class service levels with real cost savings.” **IE**

