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# Apprentice expert

At the 2021 IRTE Skills Challenge awards, Adrian Jones, engineering director at Metroline London, won the Philip Margrave Memorial for Outstanding Achievement. He speaks to Will Dalrymple about his work refashioning apprentice training at the operator

**H**aving worked more than 20 years mostly at another London bus operator, Adrian Jones joined Metroline London seven years ago. One of the things he inherited from his predecessor in the role was a desire to develop the training programme and apprentice bit of the business.

States Jones: “When a shortage of tanker drivers meant that people couldn’t fill up their cars, it was a high-profile problem. We have a problem with engineering apprentices: this is a good industry to get into, but it doesn’t get any public attention.”

At the moment, he says that Metroline is 50-60 technicians short of a full rota employed at 14 locations around London (where it employs 370 technicians). Partly that is affected by the age profile of technicians; partly by eastern Europeans not coming to work in London; also, the pandemic has stopped the flow of travelling workers.

For all of these reasons, he set out to develop the existing apprentice programme, which was previously carried out with a college in the Midlands. He explains: “To be fair to the provider, some of the problems we were having with guys coming out of the programme were that the apprentices didn’t like leaving London and being sent there on block-release.”

Instead, Metroline brought the tutors to them. Having the benefit



of a spare workshop at its Perivale engineering and logistics centre, it turned it into a classroom, and engaged a new provider - Manchester College, now Total People. It’s been a huge success.

The first intake, five years ago, was 10 students, but has doubled since then. “That’s quite a substantial commitment from the business. That takes a lot of funding, because in the first 2-2.5 years, we are feeding knowledge in, and hoping to get good apprentices out. We have also stuck with a five-year programme. After three years, they come out as skilled engineers, and then we carry on developing them through enhancing

their product knowledge with dedicated courses for the next 12 months, and then they have an improver year. Then, generally, they stay.”

Jones reports that there have been suggestions at the Trailblazer level to develop a short course for technicians, given the number of vacancies, but the bus operator is in it for the long haul. “We want to give them a good qualification that will take them through their career and last a lifetime,” Jones says. “After three years, they will be good, but we want to stretch their boundaries and develop their performance and appetite. There is no ceiling to their capabilities.”

Several ex-apprentices have gone on to become master technicians and workshop managers, he points out.

This year, Metroline has installed two portable classrooms for academic training, and set up gearboxes and training rigs in the classroom space, as well as driving in an actual bus for learning.

In addition, Metroline has opened up the course to other London operators. “They are kept separate by Total People, but one of my apprentices might be learning next to someone from [another operator]. For us, it’s not about being precious, but about putting people into the industry,” Jones concludes. **TE**