



Keeping irtec credible

The irtec scheme allows the employer to ensure the technicians are up to speed with regards knowledge and competence as well as judging as to any training needed by the technician, according to SOE president John Eastman. He adds that, from the operator's point of view, the scheme provides the comfort of knowing that vehicles submitted for maintenance are in good hands and that fully-trained technicians are carrying out the work to ensure compliance to the operator license regulations. Of course, operators are legally responsible for any servicing mistakes in the hopefully remote event of a road traffic accident.

Despite the risks, some cynical operators might believe that irtec is more akin to a certificate of attendance. That prompts two key questions: is it really the most rigorous method of ensuring competence, and is it immune from being taken for a free ride?

To become irtec-accredited, candidates must score at least 60% in an online knowledge test and attain full

The irtec vehicle technician scheme sets out to ensure competency, but can it be scammed? Ben Spencer finds out what protections are in place

HANDLING COMPLAINTS

The irtec scheme has a mechanism in place for dealing with approved complaints from clients on work that has been carried out. This would prompt the SOE to investigate.

John Eastman states: "We would speak with the owner of the garage, or the manager, and let them know that we have received a complaint and seek more information on the technician that carried out the work. We would then do an investigation to determine where, or indeed if, the technician went wrong."

If the investigation revealed that the technician was not up to scratch, they would have to retake the competence test.

marks in a practical exam in any one of the accreditations available: service & maintenance technician, inspection technician, advanced technician and master technician (see also feature, pp18-19). Another irtec route is also available for technicians involved in the isolation, reinstatement and safety of high voltage driveline systems fitted to large electric vehicles (EVs).

Eastman says there are currently 10,870 technicians who hold the five-year licence (excluding that for large EVs, which is three years). "The company pays for their employee to be licensed and they ensure that it gets renewed every five years. If an employee goes to another garage, the new employer could pay for them to do it again or they may have to front the bill themselves."

PROTECTIONS IN PLACE

While irtec sets a clear benchmark technicians need to achieve, the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) manages the scheme and sends an external quality assurer (EQA) to ensure the centres are delivering irtec correctly.



PUTTING IRTEC INTO PRACTICE

Paul Clark Services (PCS) has 120 engineers and uses irtec to ensure all are competent.

PCS provides engineering support predominantly to the bus industry but also has a workshop in Royal Wootton Bassett where staff work on vehicles including vans, PCVs and HGVs. However, most of its work is engineering support via shift cover at customer sites. PCS also provides technicians for electrical, fuel and transition diagnostics and repair works, and is a service partner for BYD, ZF, Switch Mobility and Cummins.

National engineering auditor Ben Hamlet says it is especially helpful to use irtec to assess competency in situations where an engineer has an international qualification. The underpinning knowledge tests cover a variety of Level 3 standard questions, including fault diagnosis as well as other areas of crucial knowledge, and ensures that their understanding from their apprenticeship matches the level PCS customers require. The practical element is also important as it ensures the candidate has a good inspection routine and knows how and why they are checking a component and to the correct standard. He adds: "We decided that we'd go down the route of using irtec because not only is it good for CPD and it shows an engineer has the required knowledge, but things are also updating all the time."

Hamlet visits PCS engineers around the UK to assess their irtec competency. He also manages training for the irtec inspection technician and large EV route. In 2020, PCS became an IMI-approved irtec training centre.

Currently, PCS has engineers who are trained to work on all electric and hybrid vehicles, including BYD's electric buses. "As this technology progresses, we need to move with the times," says Hamlet.

"In the big cities, there have always been engineers who are trained in high-voltage work, but now we are starting to see more demand from customers outside these locations."

The EQA will request a sample of the assessment and quality assurance records before the claim will be allowed. Once the centre has provided a good track record of assessment and quality assurance records, it could be awarded direct claims status, allowing the centre coordinator or other authorised personnel to claim certificates for candidates who have met the requirements without prior sampling by the EQA.

Adrian Stevenson, external quality manager - north at IMI, says: "The centres are audited every six months and we physically observe the irtec assessors to make sure everything is above board." If a centre begins to register more candidates, additional EQAs will be allocated to support the auditing of the centre. During these observations, the EQAs are looking to ensure the assessment paperwork and candidate briefing are correct. They will also check that the assessor remains unobtrusive and allows the candidate to complete the assessment and provide feedback afterward.

SITTING EXAMS

The auditing process may guarantee standards in the delivery of irtec, but how do you prevent candidates cheating during the exam? Stevenson reveals that the IMI has a process where it can look at the dates and times when the online assessment has been set, the score and how long it has taken the candidate to complete the exam. As part of the IMI quality assurance process, the EQA will observe the centre's invigilation of the online assessment and record its findings. Each invigilator has to be approved by IMI, with the invigilation records of the online assessment for each invigilator scrutinised through EQA auditing.

"If potential centre maladministration or malpractice is identified, it would result in an investigation by the IMI," he says. Depending on the severity, subsequent

action varies but could result in the centre losing its IMI approval.

Delving further into this issue, IMI awarding product specialist Dave Skelly explains that the questions are changed for each exam. "For example, the knowledge test in the inspection technician [route] will have a bank of around 250 questions set against different subjects and topics, such as build inspection methods, inspection routines, categorisation of vehicle defects, health and safety, compliance, tools and equipment involved in inspecting vehicles."

Protections aside, the IMI's role also extends to helping candidates get in the right headspace before testing. Skelly says: "We put in some prerequisites and some material on the website in preparation for the assessment that would help better prepare individuals. We have covered all the bases during the development process to make sure the candidate is put at ease, because we want people to be fairly judged against the competences, and not be at a disadvantage."

If candidates do not pass the exam on their first attempt, they receive a report with feedback on the areas for improvement. The participant could then engage with the assessment organisation to arrange more training before being re-assessed.

Looking ahead, Eastman, who also chairs the irtec steering group, adds that the irtec examinations continue to evolve; for example, the arrival of hydrogen-powered vehicles will bring further changes to irtec. "Anything that comes along, we recognise that we need something that establishes competence at these levels and covers everything in transport engineering. This gives the vehicle operator the confidence that if the technician is competence-tested to irtec standard, then it is getting a good level of repair and maintenance on that vehicle." **TE**