

WELL DONE

These days, the biggest employers of apprentice technicians tend to be the OEMs, and one thing they like to do is run award schemes for their trainees. Lucy Radley asks why they go to the effort, and whether the rest of us are missing a trick

Volvo Trucks hands out its apprentice awards at a full cap and gown graduation ceremony, held almost annually since the launch of modern apprenticeships in 1996 (pictured below). "Our graduations have always been great events," says Adam Plastow, competence development manager (delivery & apprenticeships). "They took a hit due to COVID, but we ran a very successful graduation last year at Leicester De Montfort University."

In Volvo's case, every apprentice is entered for the awards from the start of their apprenticeship, with the result being decided through his or her time on the programme. To do this, feedback is gathered from tutors and mentors, based on the results of the various tests and other workplace tasks that they undertake during their training. "We like to do it this way as we don't feel it's fair to judge it on one day of competition, due to the pressure that would involve," Plastow states. "We have categories for the academic side, the practical elements and an overall apprentice of the year award."

The scheme isn't easy to run, not least because of the number of stakeholders involved from within the dealer network, each of whom wants to put their own stamp on the apprenticeships for their business. Nor is the overall apprenticeship programme cheap; as well as providing a training facility and both vehicles and tools, highly-skilled staff need to be attracted from

within the industry to teach, and the administration side is very human resource-heavy. The current funding cap from the apprenticeship levy is also low, with employers having to contribute an extra amount on top of that to get people of sufficient quality.

The graduation and award ceremonies do help retention, however, and maybe even help attract apprentices in the first place. "Our scheme was started as the best way to bring technicians into the business, and ensure there were a reasonable number in the industry," Plastow explains, "but it is about the whole experience in the dealer, and at the training academy. To my mind, the graduation is also for family to celebrate and be proud of the apprentices' achievement."

GROWING COHORT

Scania UK has around 300 apprentices at the moment, a number it hopes to increase by around 10% year-on-year over the next few years. The majority of those are aiming to qualify as heavy vehicle technicians. Like Volvo, Scania runs a graduation ceremony for all its apprentices, which takes the form of a gala dinner. A competition runs earlier



the same day, and the results are announced in front of the competitors' peers.

To recognise the very best of each cohort, since 1996 it has run an annual competition called apprentice of the year at the Scania Training Centre in Loughborough. "The apprentices are our future lifeblood for the business across all disciplines," says Aaron McGrath, head of people development and once a technician himself. "The apprentice programme, for us, is probably the most important part of our training portfolio."

He continues: "We have around 90 workshops around the country, including our own captive workshops and those in the franchised dealer group. To find the apprentice of the year, we ask each of the workshop managers, along with our training provider Remit, to nominate the best people in their final year group; then we invite the top five to come and test their skills and knowledge."

Once in Loughborough, the five trainees are put through a series of

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Emily Eyre



and press associated with it either,” McGrath concludes. “It gives a boost to the whole workshop when one of their colleagues wins.”

DAF Trucks’ annual apprentice graduation and awards ceremony is another which has been around since the 90s, this being the 25th year the event has been run. As well as celebrating the completion of DAF’s three-year technician apprenticeship by that year’s cohort, winners are also announced for each of the three apprentice year groups. As well as the trainees’ parents, the lavish event is also attended by representatives from both the DAF dealer network and DAF itself.

And it is another manufacturer which runs a competition to find its winners. Ten finalists from each year group are selected to compete by their tutors at the City of Bristol College, after which they are put through a challenging assessment to test their practical and theoretical knowledge. All the finalists receive an award recognising their achievement, along with a polo shirt, while the winners pick up a prestigious engraved award, and receive a substantial voucher towards buying their own tools.

The DAF apprenticeship scheme itself plays a key role in attracting and preparing technicians for DAF’s large dealer network. Run in conjunction with Skillnet and the City of Bristol College, this year it attracted 130 new trainees.

“The apprentice competition takes a lot of time and effort but, together with the apprentice graduation ceremony, it is very much part of the DAF calendar – an integral part of our efforts to grow and strengthen the DAF team,” says Emily Eyre, training and development manager with overall responsibility for the DAF apprenticeship programme. “It’s a very worthwhile and, in fact, highly valued part of the programme. A recognition of the hard work put in by our apprentices.” [TE](#)

five workstations – four practical and one theory. The practicals are around things like maintenance, electrical systems, engine and fuel systems, and rebuilding gearboxes, while the theory station involves answering multiple choice questions. Fifty points are available at each. “We make it clear that they’re all winners for getting that far in the first place,” McGrath assures us, “but it’s the one with the highest score at the end who wins the trophy.” That deserving winner also receives a £1,000 cash allowance towards tools. “The runners

up get goodie bags, but there’s also kudos in having been invited – plus they pick up additional skills thanks to the extra pressure of having timed workstations, and encountering things they weren’t expecting.” Top apprentices can go on to represent Scania at events like the Worldskills competition – in fact, the 2022 apprentice of the year winner, George Hinkley (pictured, far left) won the UK final just before Christmas, an extra gift for employer Scania South Mimms.

RECOGNITION

“In the end, the awards are both about recognising the best of the best, and also giving them aspirations,” McGrath adds. And it’s not just the apprentices themselves which Scania hopes to encourage; the competitions give dealerships something to aspire to as well – not only does it reward greater investment in staff, but also ensures the highest quality training possible is delivered. “It’s not just the marketing

