

As more electric commercial vehicles appear, what does the real cost and benefit analysis reveal for end users?

Despite being ridiculed by many, it is refreshing to see mainstream vehicle manufacturers embark on, and then persevere with, electric vans. Industry legislation and standards continue to force the green issue, and, it seems, all avenues are being explored. The likes of Mercedes-Benz and Iveco clearly recognise that, despite the vehicle industry's biggest polluter in the UK being the humble automobile, the potential in offering operators the chance to run tailpipe emission-free commercial vehicle fleets is potentially huge.

However, while battery-powered vans ease the carbon burden, they do nothing for the operating costs or profit margins. Major manufacturers freely admit that electric vehicles (and the batteries needed to power them) will cost more than double the price of conventional, diesel-powered, models. With that in mind, suddenly the thought of environmental friendliness becomes less of an attractive proposition and economic logic may well prevail.

And such reservations are not confined to those controlling the company finances. Workshop managers and technicians have expressed concerns about the safety of high-power automotive batteries, which can cause enormous damage if short circuited, because of the immense amount of energy stored. There is also potential danger, should the power packs become damaged or crushed in an accident. We understand that such batteries are subject to stringent safety testing before they are approved for use and that a range of international standards has been developed especially for this purpose – but certain risks remain.

Manufacturers that have produced battery-powered vehicles have, understandably, gone out of their way to insist that these batteries are safe, specifically including their chemical content. Some have even stated that batteries, in general, present a lower hazard in the case of an accident than a full tank of petrol or diesel.

But are such assurances enough to convince operators to go electric? The ball, it seems, is in their court.



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