

Hybrids and electrics entering adoption phase

Have you noticed the tide turning with electric and hybrid commercial vehicles? It's not just about the growing numbers of operators, public and private, starting to adopt them. Quietly, but inexorably, finance houses are beginning to invest serious money in what they clearly see as a lucrative and hastening future.

ePower Trucks, for example, which saw sales of its electric trucks and utility vehicles grow 55% last year, recently secured £1 million funding from Yorkshire Bank. The Oldham-based firm says it intends to use the money not only to expand its range of 3.5-tonne electric LCVs, but also to use its new working capital to support anticipated significant growth.

Then again, just a few short weeks ago, Ashwoods Energy, which supplies batteries and battery management systems to various electric and hybrid vehicle producers, won the regional finals of the Shell Springboard awards – and £30,000 in start-up funding. These awards promote innovative UK small businesses with compelling ideas to combat climate change. Plainly, the judges saw something big in the offing with Ashwoods Energy's specialised lithium-ion equipment – no doubt persuaded by parent company Ashwoods Automotive's considerable success with its Hybrid Transits for Royal Mail and Transport for London.

Meanwhile, last month the Energy Technologies Institute (ETI) announced £40 million of funding for what it believes will be one of Europe's largest heavy vehicle efficiency programmes, in this case aimed at HGVs, construction and agricultural equipment, and shipping – and with a goal of 30% improvement. Dr David Clarke, CEO of the ETI, states that findings from a feasibility study, commissioned by the ETI in 2009, highlighted "significant opportunities to accelerate vehicle technology development, through investment in a range of platform technologies". He anticipates vehicles incorporating, for example, new technology powertrains, on sale by 2020.

It's all about pushing for, and profiting from, technologies that are increasingly capable of delivering radical reductions in emissions and just as radical improvements in fuel efficiency. Even the Mayor of London Boris Johnson is in on the act – reminding commercial vehicle owners and operators of changes to the emissions standards for the London Low Emission Zone that come into force next year. Admittedly, we're only talking about vehicles (around 75,000 HGVs, buses and coaches, and 72,000 larger vans and minibuses) having to meet the Euro 3 engine emissions standard. However, it's clear that sticks (£100 daily charge or a £500 penalty for vans and minibuses; £200 or a £1,000 penalty for HGVs, buses and coaches), carrots and commercial interest are only going to push commercial vehicles one way.

All of this means impending significant changes in key technologies for transport engineers to take on board – both at the vehicle specification end and in their workshops. And it's not just about powertrain developments: aerodynamics and heat rejection approaches, for example – currently part of the truck OEMs' drive to meet Euro 6 – will also signal important modifications. The CV Show is almost upon us (12–14 April at the NEC), with trucks and equipment from across the industry. Might be a sound plan to get down there and find out what all this means for you.



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Published by: The Society of Operations Engineers

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Registered in England: Company No. 3667147

Registered Charity: No. 1081753 A Company Limited by Guarantee

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Publisher: Peter Knutton

Transport Engineer is the official journal of IRTE.
Produced on behalf of IRTE and The Society of Operations Engineers by Findlay Media Ltd, Hawley Mill, Hawley Road, Dartford, Kent DA2 7TJ
Tel: 01322 221144
Fax: 01322 221188
www.transportengineer.org.uk

Transport Engineer is distributed free of charge to SOE members, dependent on membership sector. For non-members, the annual subscription rate (12 issues) is £68 UK and EU, or £70 airmail outside EU. For other SOE members, the discounted rate is £27.

Printed by: Holbrooks Printers Ltd, Portsmouth ISSN: 0020-3122

Views expressed in Transport Engineer are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Society of Operations Engineers or of Findlay Media Ltd.
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