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Engineers

IRTE

engineering success

More to success than longer, greener trucks

Having ruled out longer heavier vehicles back in 2006, on grounds of impracticality, the DfT has finally given the go-ahead for a public consultation on semi-trailers up to 2.05m longer than the current maximum, but within the 44 tonnes limit (page 21).

That is excellent news for the industry, which has been shouting about the absurdity of existing rules for years. Many will argue that it doesn't go far enough, in terms of either additional length or weight. They will point out, quite rightly, that the technologies for steering very long, multi-vehicle combinations have evolved exponentially in recent years – and that studies plainly show that bigger is better, particularly in these times of fuel and carbon cutting, not to mention traffic abatement.

Nevertheless, it is a step in the right direction and hauliers can almost certainly look forward to a not too distant future when transporting up to 15% more pallets or 20% more retail cages, at virtually no extra cost, becomes a reality. No extra cost, that is, apart from finding the capex for new longer trailers, dealing with the resulting plunging residuals for 13.6 metre tri-axials – and doing so quickly, as operators struggle to get on board, in order to remain competitive.

Then there's the looming introduction of Euro 6 engined vehicles (page 14), which are bound to jack up prices of tractor units (Transport Engineer, January 2011, page 18), while also eating into available payload, caused by the extra emissions-reducing equipment. Avoiding these costs may mean running existing, already tired vehicles for longer, or getting orders in for new Euro 5-based vehicles well ahead of the due date (31 December 2013). Either way, hard pressed operators are likely to find themselves forced, yet again, to swallow some bitter and expensive pills.

All the more reason, then, to sharpen our focus on some of the day-to-day issues of haulage that transport managers and fleet engineers alike can more readily influence – such as reducing downtime, caused by mechanical problems, roadside prohibitions and sinking OCS (operator compliance risk score) stats, and improving customer satisfaction, by ensuring consistently reliable on-time deliveries. Each influences the other, and each, self evidently, provides a clear, doable and sustainable route to cutting costs and growing any transport business.

Nothing new there, you might say: this is, after all, meat and drink. So what else can we do? Clues emerged at last month's successfully reborn CV Show at the NEC. DAF, for example, announced that it is the first of the truck manufacturers to adopt the irtec commercial vehicle technician accreditation scheme throughout its entire UK dealer network, with 650 staff already registered. Morrisons, too, unveiled plans for technicians working across the retailer's fleet. Both pointed to the value of assured competence in vehicle inspections and maintenance.

Next, there were inroads on driver training, with telematics-based aids from DAF, Mercedes-Benz and others, aimed at sorting out some of the fundamentals. Further, IRTE and the FTA (Freight Transport Association) formalised a joint workshop accreditation scheme, tasked with enabling transport operators to buy maintenance services with greater confidence.

It's all about improving competence and professionalism, while cutting costs. Sounds good?

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