

Lessons learned

Apprenticeships may be increasing in popularity, but many believe more emphasis needs to be placed on skills to get the best out of budding engineers, writes John Challen

In recent months, many industry figures have been championing apprenticeships, highlighting the importance of gaining practical engineering experience to take into the world of work. Much of the talk may have been in response to the decision by universities to increase tuition fees, but apprenticeships are also seeing a resurgence as people struggle to find jobs that match their interests.

So maybe we can expect more apprentices to choose from, but John Nollett, managing director of vehicle steering systems manufacturer Pailton Engineering, maintains that it is still difficult to find competent ones. He says the issue needs addressing at source: "The biggest problem is literacy and numeracy," says Nollett. "Basic maths skills, such as working out angles, are absolutely crucial to what we do."

In recent decades, Pailton has grown its own talent by training apprentices – but every year the company finds it harder to recruit individuals with appropriate basic skills. "Apprentices need to be able to carry out simple calculations in an industrial environment. So it is very disappointing that so many youngsters cannot meet that standard, as it rules them out of many jobs," states Nollett.

And he's not alone. Now retired, Carl Stephens spent his life in transport, having run his own operation and also worked for a variety of companies, including Ford & Slater Group, H&L Garages and Truck Links. He believes apprentice



quality has only gone in one direction. "There is a necessity to review training methods and the effectiveness of the NVQ, because the syllabus covers basic theory, but, without the practical experience, discipline or qualifications previously recognised by our industry," he maintains.

"With computerised engine management, modern braking systems, reactive suspensions, assisted gear selection, fuel injection, emission controls, plus the effect of legislation on service maintenance, it is obvious that our training techniques need to be redeveloped. My concerns are that technicians are being called qualified, but without the necessary engineering skills."

Learning from the past

In Stephens' experience, youth training schemes from the 1980s brought together strong teams and, when problems arose that affected progress, all staff from management to trainees were given the opportunity to express their concerns. "Their input was invaluable and I have had the reward of seeing many of the staff progress in their careers, with the same openness in management and awareness of the benefits of training," he comments.

Apprenticeships are proving successful for operators, but could a revamp of their training be on the way?



Such a situation would not have been achievable, if the present standards of training had been employed, he insists. "This is a frightening realisation and illustrates the backward step taken by our industry, after such a long period of development. Unfortunately, it has been a case of the industry shooting itself in the foot and emphasises the need for strong controls in future training schemes or government partnerships," adds Stephens.

Truck manufacturer commitment to apprentices, however, appears to remain good. DAF Trucks, for example, was recently voted one of the top 100 apprentice employers in a joint initiative by the National Apprenticeship Service and City & Guilds. The award was given for DAF's National Dealer Apprentice Programme, a three-year scheme, managed by Skillnet, that is now the largest in the UK, specialising in heavy goods vehicle repair and maintenance skills.

But note that this programme combines hands-on workshop training with periods of residential study and practical training at the DAF Trucks Centre of Learning at the City of Bristol College. "The DAF programme has undoubtedly raised the level of skill right across the dealer network and has provided excellent careers for hundreds of young people," comments Tony Shepherd, aftersales service manager at DAF Trucks.

Elsewhere, MAN's head of service John Davies believes the truck builder's apprentice scheme is "one of the company's greatest success stories".

Recently presented for the 16th time, MAN's Apprentice of the Year Awards recognised the ongoing commitment of apprentices to the company, and its truck and service centres.

"The next generation of technicians and aftersales support people is crucial to the future success of the company. It always fills me with great pride to see our young apprentices doing so well," continues Davies. "The awards provide a stepping stone to a great career within our industry."

MAN Apprenticeships are managed in conjunction with S&B Training Academy. The Bristol operation has invested heavily in a purpose-built, state-of-the-art commercial vehicle workshop and training facility, and has this year experienced a 40-year high in apprentice performance. In the 2010/11 academic year, S&B doubled the number of successful apprenticeships over the previous year, with some 350 apprentices graduating.

The academy has also become the first UK training provider in all sectors to successfully undertake the new Capability and Performance Assessment, as part of the new Training Excellence recognition, which has replaced the government's Training Quality Standard.

S&B has set its sights on further improvements, following the opening of its £1million training centre. And the good news for apprentices is that managing director Jon Winter reckons the re-development will also enable the academy to increase numbers by a further 20% in 2012. **TE**

Bullwell's bespoke training scheme for non-apprentices

Proving that it is never too late to learn, a bespoke scheme, aimed specifically at trailer engineers, has been developed by Bullwell Trailer Solutions.

Following a trial period, the training programme has gained the seal of approval from Bullwell's major clients, and will now be rolled out to all 54 of the company's mobile and on-site engineers. It aims to ensure that all employees work to criteria approved by blue-chip clients.

Bullwell reports that this is the first training scheme across the UK targeted specifically at trailer engineers. Consisting of three tiers of training – bronze, silver and gold – the scheme, he says, will train all employees, irrespective of qualifications and experience, to at least bronze by the end of this year.

At bronze, employees will be assessed on their understanding of the testing criteria outlined by VOSA and follow the safety standards enforced at Bullwell. The aim is for all technicians to work to a consistent standard that is reflective of trailer manufacturer's standard of service. The training is mainly theoretical and requires a 75% pass rate in a final exam.

Bullwell Trailer Solutions engineer Steve Pye is the mastermind behind the scheme. "Working alongside our key

clients means that we were able to focus our training around their requirements," he explains. "Ensuring staff keep their skills and knowledge up to date, and that they remain working to the best of their ability, is vital. This programme has already proved beneficial to Bullwell in its trial period and we are delighted to be expanding it, so that it incorporates all trailer engineers."

Steve Pye: Vital to keep skills and knowledge up to date

