

Class acts?

Finding enough good truck and bus apprentice technicians is as much about providing more engaging and relevant training as it is about changing hearts and minds, writes John Challen

In a difficult jobs market, you might think young people starting out in work would jump at the chance of an apprenticeship. Sadly, some operators and manufacturers are finding that is just not the case – a situation that has led to a reassessment of what, how and who they are teaching.

Take Arriva. “Over the last two or three years, we’ve reviewed our apprenticeship scheme,” states Lloyd Mason, engineer trainer at Arriva UK Bus. Why? Mason is candid: “Because, in the past, we’ve had apprentices due to complete courses, but managers saying they don’t want them. They were not up to the right standard.”

After four years of investing a lot of time, money and effort into would-be technicians, that outcome is far from ideal. Mason says that Arriva’s response has been a significant review of its activities. For example, the bus operator is currently updating its apprenticeship manual to include additional best practice procedures. There will also be more detail around some of the engineering tasks required of technicians, and further advice on how to work more efficiently and effectively.

Another idea from Arriva has been the development of a new option for apprentices. Running alongside the existing schemes for mechanical, electrical and bodywork qualifications is what Mason refers to as a ‘mech-elec’ standard. This is designed to reflect the growing demand for multi-skilled technicians.

“Two years ago, I was part of a working group for GoSkills [the Sector Skills Council for passenger transport], and we needed to devise a framework for apprentices, anticipating the changes that would be coming,” explains Mason. “One area with the biggest growth potential was integration of electronics into vehicles, and therefore diagnostics on the major components – such as brakes, the transmission and engine – have become important.”

And hence Arriva’s new mech-elec option. “In the very near future, we will need more technicians with the skills of mechanics and electricians combined,” comments Mason, adding that Arriva is taking the new approach gradually,



with five technicians on this year’s intake. “It is still a small part of the qualification and no-one has finished the course yet. So we haven’t had a chance to see what you get as a ‘finished article’.”

Apprentice frustrations

Finding the next generation of transport engineers is proving a tough ask elsewhere, too, but for a different reason. Dorothy Hermiston, deputy training and development manager at Stagecoach, says the problem is not just quality, but also quantity.

“We’ve been getting a lot of applicants, but poor ones, and no-shows for interviews,” she reveals, adding that she is frustrated by the general public’s perception that there is a lack of apprenticeships in the industry. “We asked 10 people for interviews in South Wales, for example, and eight didn’t even turn up,” she states.

“And that is in an area of relatively high unemployment. Then in the Midlands, test results showed that none of a group of six people we brought in made the grade. That’s despite the fact that they had GCSEs and the tests are simple.”

Hermiston says she still expects to fill all the available apprentice slots at Stagecoach, but agrees that the selection process won’t be straightforward. “We think we will take nearly 60 apprentices across the group this year, but a lot of candidates haven’t got any idea of the mechanical reasoning, or turn out not to be interested in the mechanical element of the apprenticeship.”

So what can be done to stop and, better still, reverse the engineering skills shortage? Hermiston believes getting into schools is key. “Young people need to have experience of mechanical aspects, whether through working on cars or work experience,” she insists. “Maybe the school or the Careers Advice Service could do more. In Manchester, careers advisors were saying to schoolchildren, ‘If you’re not very bright, go for an engineering apprenticeship’. It took us a while to change that mentality, but we get a better quality [apprentice] from that region now.” **TE**