

Skills showcase

With the third annual IRTE Skills Challenge proving such a success, plans are already underway for next year's major event, reports John Challen

The great and the good of the UK bus technician community have once again fought for recognition at IRTE's Skills Challenge, and the winners can now be revealed (see panel). And with 16 teams fielded by seven operators – Arriva, FirstGroup, Go-Ahead London, Go South Coast, London Borough of Redbridge, Translink and Reading Buses – and 48 technicians taking part, competition was hot.

As in previous years, teams comprised electrical, mechanical and bodywork technicians, all pitting their wits against the rest in a series of tests specific to bus maintenance and repair – ranging from solving transmission and EBS faults, to tyre examination, panel fabrication and structural bonding. For the practical assessments, competitors worked on two buses – a MAN CitySmart 14:250 and a Scania Omnalink – as well as a Volvo 9700 coach.

Skills Challenge 2013 was conducted at S&B Automotive Academy, and Richard Belton, the company's deputy chief executive, believes it was a positive experience for all the technicians. "[They] were very keen to promote the professionalism of the industry," he comments. "Everyone who came was a credit to their employer."

Belton was particularly impressed with the 12 apprentice technicians. "They shone and some of their results were on a par with a lot of the established technicians," he reveals. "This is obviously great for them, but even more so for the industry – to have technicians of this quality ready for the future."

New challenges

Tests were refreshed from the previous year's competition, partly due to new sponsors, who brought new ideas. Volvo Bus, for example, asked participants to look at electrical problems on its 9700 coach, while Shell concentrated on subtle lubricants problems.

"This year, we had very competitive teams and it was a fairly level playing field, in terms of the quality of technicians," reveals Ian Chisholm, head of operations and communications at IRTE, organiser of the event. "The Skills Challenge allows technicians to demonstrate their capabilities and show what they have learned on the job. They are some of the best in the industry and, even if they don't win, they have participated, which is valuable in itself."

Belton also says it was encouraging to see technicians push themselves in unfamiliar situations. "A lot of the technicians were working under pressure, with people observing everything they did," he comments. "Also, some participants were diagnosing faults on vehicles they don't normally see, such as Volvo's coach. For technicians who only work on buses, that made them understand that their skill sets can work across different vehicles, from different manufacturers. I think this will give them more confidence."

With BAE Systems also getting involved – using its part of the programme as a training session – Skills Challenge 2013 also had more of a hybrid element than in past years and Chisholm believes this trend will continue. "While we may have just touched on it this year, with TfL buying 600 hybrid buses – and the Green Bus Fund

The winners:



Top scoring mechanical technician

(sponsored by Allison Transmission)

William Scott, Translink

Top scoring electrical technician

(sponsored by BAE Systems)

Pete Murphy, FirstGroup

Top scoring bodywork technician

(sponsored by Bridgestone)

Joseph Hotchkiss, FirstGroup

Mechanical and electrical award

(sponsored by Shell)

Ian Challoner and Dave Neal, Go South Coast

Mechanical, electrical and bodywork combined award

(sponsored by Knorr-Bremse)

William Scott, Adam McGrath and Jan Colville, Translink

Top scoring mechanical apprentice

Daniel Bartlett, FirstGroup

Top scoring electrical apprentice

Matthew Fleming, Go-Ahead London

Top scoring bodywork apprentice

James Ward, Arriva UK Bus

IRTE award for outstanding achievement

Glenn Cooke, Colin Harris and Stephen Hall,

Arriva UK Bus

Left to right, John Ratcliff CBE, outgoing SOE patron, Colin Harris, Glenn Cooke, Stephen Hall and Nick Jones, outgoing SOE chief exec



making it attractive for other fleets to invest in hybrid technology – hybrids are not something we can ignore," he states.

"Euro 6 technology will also be an interesting subject. Next year, there may be new issues for bus technicians," he adds.

Details of Skills Challenge 2014 are yet to be confirmed, but look out for more information in Transport Engineer. **TE**