

Conquering compliance

Compliance should be right at the top of every transport operator's list of priorities - and not just to please the authorities - said the IRTE Conference expert panel. John Challen reports

The goalposts might move, with the introduction of new regulations and associated guidance, but fleet managers, technicians and drivers all need to get on top of them and make sure they are compliant. That was the message from industry heavyweights on the expert panel at the IRTE Conference, all of whom were concerned with raising standards across the transport industry and particularly in workshops.

Senior traffic commissioner Beverley Bell kicked off by focusing on the role of transport managers. "In [traffic commissioner for the North East] Kevin Rooney's annual report, he sets out what's required of a transport manager," she told delegates. "Underneath four bullet points, he states: 'Nowhere in the legislation does it talk about popping into the operator's premises for a cup of tea and a shuffle of a few tachograph charts'."

If that sounds like your operation, be advised that

there is room for improvements - and you had better sit up and take notice. "We need to professionalise our industry, and improve its image, because it is poor and it doesn't deserve that," she insisted.

Meanwhile, Mrs Bell also praised the IRTE and SOE (Society of Operations Engineers) for their work on developing the irtec technician licensing and Workshop Accreditation schemes. "I'm not here to sell the membership, but I am here to do what I can to professionalise the industry. So join up, develop best practice, share best practice," she said, adding that those using maintenance contractors should ensure that they are Workshop Accreditation approved and employing irtec-certified technicians.

For Mrs Bell, this kind of investment in people and processes is the surest path to sustainable compliance. "What's important is that we invest in staff, whether they're literally keeping the wheels of industry turning, or fulfilling back office duties." And she noted the impressive returns cited for operators that have gone down this route. "An 8% increase in achieving 100% MOT pass rate; a 66% reduction in PRS [pass with rectification at station] rates; and a £3 return for every pound invested. That's not bad."

Step up or step out

The baton then passed to Alastair Peoples, chief executive of VOSA (Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) and now also DSA (Driving Standards Association), who reminded delegates of the agencies' roles in encouraging compliance. "It's not my job to go and find non-compliance," he insisted. "VOSA is concerned with helping operators to move either towards greater compliance, or towards the traffic commissioners. There is no value in us finding non-compliant operators and issuing prohibitions: we would be doing the same thing over and over again."

His advice: work on your compliance now, but where you do encounter VOSA, use the experience and advice to improve your operation. If you don't, you risk the ultimate sanction of removal from the transport industry. OCRS (operator compliance risk

Beverley Bell



Alastair Peoples



John Parry



score) is part of that, he reminded delegates, describing the mechanism as one of the best things VOSA has introduced in recent years. "It is primarily a score to help us target errant operators, but the industry sees it as much more. It is not, and was never designed to be, a rating scheme, but it is important you know your score and use that knowledge to improve it," he urged.

For him, too, it was clear that the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme and irtec should be part of the process. Indicating that VOSA examiners are now adopting irtec as the standard, he said: "If it's good enough for you, it is good enough for me."

Thousands of irtec technicians

Talking of irtec, John Parry, chairman of the irtec steering group, next revealed that, since the irtec's re-launch, 3,653 technicians have been registered, 1,000 from the DAF network, and many more from MAN and other truck OEMs. "The steering group looks at strategy, marketing, how we should manage the training, and where we should be pushing forward... We review several modules continuously – and there is also an expert working group, with people at the sharp end who know what we should be testing against and assessing," he explained.

It's all part of ensuring that irtec reflects vehicle technology. "We also constantly review other inputs for irtec, and look at new modules – such as roadside recovery, from an operatives' point of view," he said. Indeed, Parry urged operators and technician trainers alike to consider irtec as providing a framework for their operations. "irtec takes you from service technician to master technician, which completely reflects the structure of workshops."

So much for the background: delegates next heard from Gary King, logistics operations support manager at Sainsbury's, who provided an operator perspective. As part of an overhaul of the retailer's approach to vehicle maintenance, King revealed that R&M, formerly with external contactors, has now been brought in-house. "Now we are able to manage


the cost base better, and we have better vehicle compliance," he stated, adding that VMUs (vehicle maintenance units) work to SLAs (service level agreements) and are audited to ensure consistency, in line with maintaining a professional 'O' licence.

Part of the improvement has also involved Sainsbury's investing in day-to-day visibility and management of its fleet of 3,800 tractors, rigids and trailers – with a tracking system at the sharp end. Beyond that, King pointed to improved reporting, involving both its transport and security teams. Drivers, for example, have responsibility for checking service inspections. "Our drivers now know when the next service is due, as well as the next MOT," he stated. "We also get our security team to make sure, at the depot gate, that our fleet is compliant."

Throughout, said King, the goal is efficiency in tandem with compliance. And it's working: "Our MOT pass rate is 98.7% but we can still do better," he said, adding that improvements have reflected on efficiency. "The percentage of vehicles off the road has gone down from 5% to 2.48%, which means we can reduce the size of the fleet," he explained.

But what does good look like for workshops? Keith Sims, group operations director at MAN truck dealership HRVS, said that Workshop Accreditation and irtec provide the answer. "As an operator, I couldn't sleep without knowing what was going on in my repair centres... So Workshop Accreditation is something we have adopted wholeheartedly."

Was it onerous? "No, as a MAN dealer, the standard was easy to achieve. We only had to make minor tweaks to our administration. We already had a robust training regime; we monitored MOT pass rates closely; every technician outside of an apprenticeship programme was irtec registered; and we had quality control systems in place," he asserted.

But the last word goes to Mrs Bell. Summing up her take on the next action for transport managers and fleet engineers, she said: "Join up, join in and let's deliver an industry that we can be really proud of, for the benefit of GB plc." 

Gary King



Keith Sims



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