



Whether you opt for new vehicles on R&M packages or prefer in-house or independent workshops for new and used trucks and vans, you'd better make sure they're up to the job. Steve Banner reports

It's your GO licence

Having invested heavily in workshop equipment, technician training and parts stocks, franchised truck dealers are now determined to increase their share of the aftermarket. R&M (repair and maintenance) contracts represent a key weapon in their armoury and they are pushing them hard.

"Over 50% of the trucks we supply are supported by R&M agreements that run for up to five years," says David Joyce, director of customer services for commercial vehicles at Mercedes-Benz. And: "Approximately 50–60% of the trucks we sell are sold with an R&M package," states John Davies, head of service and support at MAN.

Yet, while the OEMs undoubtedly offer nationwide coverage (MAN's network boasts 69 workshops; Iveco has 96; and DAF 134), the presence of a truck maker's logo above the workshop door is not a guarantee of competence.

Some dealers are exceptional. Some, alas, are not. That is why an independent yardstick of a workshop's capabilities, franchised or non, is so vitally important, insists Ian Chisholm, head of operations and communications at the SOE – Society of Operations Engineers, the umbrella organisation for

the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers).

He points to the IRTE's Workshop Accreditation scheme, explaining that certified workshops have passed a demanding audit, carried out by engineers from the FTA (Freight Transport Association), covering everything from equipment, and the competence and experience of their staff, to quality of documentation.

It gives operators the ability to buy maintenance provision with confidence, he reasons, stating that accreditation lasts for three years. "Around 80% of operators use third party repairers and we introduced the programme in response to worries they expressed about the quality of the work being done on their vehicles," explains Chisholm.

"They wanted an independent standard... Around 75 workshops have been accredited so far and there are another 20 or so in the pipeline," he adds. Back in June, Pullman Fleet Services, for example, announced that three more of its sites – Lea Green in St Helens, Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire and West Thurrock in Essex – had reached the standard. All service the Co-operative Group.

Chisholm goes on to stress that just as important as accreditation of the workshop is irtec certification for its technicians. He would like to see anybody



Wherever you go for repair and maintenance, competence and professionalism are essential

required to work on a truck meeting the standard, which is valid for five years. "The road transport industry must wake up to the fact that the latest generation of trucks is sophisticated and needs a new breed of technician to look after them," he insists.

Re-launched three years ago, irtec – which is delivered by a partnership that includes the Institute of the Motor Industry and IMI Awards as well as the IRTE – has some way to go, however, before it embraces everybody who ought to meet its standard. "Around 3,500 people are irtec licensed so far, but there could be as many as 30,000 truck technicians in the country," Chisholm remarks. "Nobody really knows." Chisholm's view of irtec's importance is endorsed by John Parry, chairman of the irtec steering group. Now an industry consultant, he can look back on many years of senior engineering posts at some of the biggest truck fleets in the country, including stints with BRS and Exel Logistics.

Legal requirement?

Parry points to the strict requirement laid down by other industries – aviation for example – that technicians must hold independently-verified qualifications. "Members of the public would be aghast if they were told that you don't need any qualifications whatsoever to be allowed to, say, maintain a spirit tanker," he remarks.

The Workshop Accreditation and irtec programmes do have their critics though. While applauding what they are trying to achieve, Volvo commercial aftersales director Tony Davis believes that the bar has not been set high enough. "The standard that has to be met is not as demanding as the standard Volvo requires," he observes.

And MAN's Davies comments: "Around 50–60% of technicians working in the MAN network meet irtec. The figure is almost 100% at some sites and the aim is to have all of them assessed by the end of next year." And he adds: "A number of MAN dealers also have Workshop Accreditation and the aim is to

reach 100% there, too. However, I have to say that, in my opinion, the irtec standard set is too low."

"The trouble with manufacturers' own standards, though, is that they all tend to be a little bit different," counters Parry. What operators require is something independent and uniform so they can make a better-informed choice, he argues. "Workshops are also increasingly being told that, if they are not involved in, or working towards, accreditation, and their technicians have not been irtec-assessed, then they will not be allowed to tender for truck maintenance work," he continues. "By adopting this stance, fleets are setting the standard before looking to see who meets it. That has to be the right approach."

If more non-franchised workshops achieve Workshop Accreditation and employ irtec-assessed technicians, that may result in some franchised dealers losing business. However, their ability to supply new trucks with R&M packages may prevent this from happening.

Davies thinks so: "At MAN, we've just done a deal with a major DIY chain that involves a seven-year R&M contract and we're offering two years' R&M and three years' warranty on all Euro 6 tractor units," he observes. That's attractive. Meanwhile, all DAF tractors come with a two-year R&M package as standard, and product marketing manager Phil Moon points to the fact that 1,100 of the 1,500 technicians in its network are already irtec-accredited.

In fact, DAF technicians undergo intense training and its network's workshops have all the equipment needed to diagnose faults and handle warranty work. Indeed, 40 are ATFs (Authorised Testing Facilities). Also, an account with a DAF dealer is covered by DAFaid, the manufacturer's 24/7 roadside rescue. Operators also have access to DAF OE parts as well as to the TRP all-makes parts programme. "It is also worth noting that the network is achieving a 93–94% first-time MOT pass rate," says Moon.

That said, Parry briskly scotches any notion that the growing sophistication of trucks and the need for diagnostics means they always need to go back to franchised dealers. "Generic diagnostic equipment is available that enables independent and in-house workshops to deal with 90% of the problems they're likely to encounter," he insists. And EU competition legislation means that manufacturers are obliged to make diagnostics information freely available.

And it works. TNT Express, for example, has 24 main and six satellite workshops, and reports a 95.56% first-time MOT pass rate – rising to 99.21% for trailers. This operator points to cost control, legal responsibility and response times (you can deal with a problem more quickly, if you have a workshop at your depot) as among main reasons why it favours in-house maintenance.

The bottom line: it is the operator's 'O' licence, so while there's an element of horses for courses, all workshops need to be checked. **TE**