

Got what it takes?

With reports of eightfold improvements in first-time MOT pass rates, 66% reductions in PRS (pass after rectification at station) and returns on investment of 200%, irtec appears to be flying. Brian Tinham reports

Since its re-launch in 2011, uptake of the IRTE's (Institute of Road Transport Engineers) nationally-recognised irtec technician licensing scheme has been taking off. Not only are most of the truck OEMs' technicians either accredited or on track for licensing soon, but operators, workshops and now DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency – formerly VOSA and DSA) are onboard.

So, why the interest? For Chris Higginbottom, senior transport engineer with Calor Gas, it's about validating skill levels at the firm's regional workshops. But it's also identifying and rectifying maintenance skills gaps in an otherwise unregulated industry.

"Over the last 18 months, we've put most of our established workforce through irtec SMT (Service Maintenance Technician), 12 through the more advanced heavy vehicle Inspection Technician, and one has achieved the top level irtec Master Technician. That shows how seriously we take our

maintenance and, with Manchester College as our training partner, it's also helped me to see where to make the most of my training budget."

Jason Downes, Hargreaves Logistics' fleet and workshop manager, has similar views. He, too, wanted to demonstrate workshop competence, but also to offer professional development for staff. So when the RHA (Road Haulage Association) recommended irtec and the training centre at Manchester College, he didn't hesitate.

"So far, the results have been very good. Seven of our 10 technicians have successfully passed the heavy vehicle and trailer Inspection Technician course – and the others are due to complete their training very soon... We are already seeing the benefits: documented, quality vehicle inspections are now being carried out and we have a quality accreditation mark that demonstrates our vehicles are maintained to the highest possible standards."

But it's not just operators: national commercial



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vehicle workshop franchise Top Truck, part of Group Auto, is also mandating irtec for any garage wanting to join its network. “We’ve got 23 truck garages across the country now and we’re looking to move up to 40 by the end of the year,” states commercial manager Martin Sangster. “We were looking for something we could use to prove the competence of technicians. It’s alright appointing garages but, no matter how good they look, you’ve got no idea how proficient they are. With irtec, everyone recognises they’re at a standard.”

Quality assurance

Sangster explains that new workshops get free technical training, through Manchester College, leading to irtec accreditation, which they have to achieve within six months. “We want at least three irtec technicians per workshop at a minimum of Inspection Technician for truck and trailer – although we already have some at Master Technician.” And he adds that Top Truck is also now working with IRTE on its Workshop Accreditation scheme.

And then there’s DVSA. Alex Fiddes, chief

operating officer for vehicle testing and enforcement, confirms that some 500 vehicle inspectors and 400 roadside examiners are being put through irtec Inspection Technician over the next couple of years. Why? “We wanted something we could benchmark our vehicle inspectors against – that would give them credibility, in terms of skills and competence. For us, irtec fitted the bill perfectly, delivering the best training and accreditation for our staff. It also demonstrates that we are serious about standards.”

Much the same applies to DVSA’s roadside enforcement officers, although Fiddes explains that, for operational reasons, their training won’t run concurrently with the in-house and ATF [Authorised Test Facility] inspectors. “I’m really committed to irtec. A lot of people look to us, and this development delivers a quality-assured programme.”

But the last word goes to Higginbottom: “Everyone should do this. My experience is that even older technicians, who were initially against it, are now proud of having irtec... Equally, if you’re selling workshop services, then irtec is the standard you’re increasingly going to be asked for. Certainly, if you want to trade with Calor Gas as an R&M supplier – which could affect our reputation and ‘O’ licence – we want you to have irtec.” **TE**

Irtec update

Although estimates for the UK’s commercial vehicle technician population range up to 30,000, just 4,000 have achieved irtec since its re-launch. However, according to IMI accreditation development manager John Hay, that’s rising at more than 1,000 per year – and with big names behind it. He cites all of the truck OEMs, led by DAF, as well as supermarket groups including Morrisons and Sainsbury’s – with the likes of Royal Mail, UPS and Veolia waiting in the wings.

Add in DVSA’s inspectors and examiners, and it’s easy to see the numbers. For Hay, this is proof not only of irtec’s valued route to compliance, but also of its relevance – the result of IRTE putting an irtec steering group and expert working group in charge.

Hence, he says, the fitness for purpose of today’s content across the four irtec levels (Service Maintenance, Inspection, Advanced and, most recently, Master Technician), covering from maintenance and inspection essentials to diagnostics, mentoring and management, for truck, bus and coach, and trailer technicians. “For example, Master Technician, developed last year, includes assessments of their understanding of modern

technologies, such as SCR [selective catalytic reduction] and Euro 5 engines,” says Hay. “Getting irtec means they’re in an excellent place to step up to Euro 6.”

According to irtec steering group chairman John Parry, next up will be irtec licences for roadside assistance, offsite working, ADR, tyre technicians, truck and bus inspection technicians, and an assessors’ award. Just as important, he says, irtec is now very accessible for busy workshop technicians, with online self-assessment tools and on-site accreditation delivery readily available. And the same goes for training, with IMI-approved courses from big names such as the FTA (Freight Transport Association), Manchester College, S&B Automotive, as well as IMI centres and the OEMs.

Ian Chisholm (pictured), head of operations and communications at IRTE’s umbrella SOE (Society of Operations Engineers), points to the inevitable momentum that stems from DVSA. “When VOSA introduced new brake testing equipment, the whole industry went out and sourced the same kit. The fact that this important government agency is now putting its vehicle inspectors and examiners through irtec sends out a similar message.”

