



# LEARNING

**Technicians, today more than ever, need a good understanding of vehicle technology, not just of how to use the diagnostics equipment. Steve Banner reports**

**W**hile the days when service and repair workshops took engines and gearboxes apart as a matter of course have largely gone, technicians still require an in-depth knowledge of how trucks function – despite popular belief. As Bob Miles, manager of Shepton Mallet-based Mendip Truck Centre, puts it: “Too many people assume that all a technician has to do these days is plug a computer into a truck and it immediately says what’s wrong.”

An MAN service dealer, his workshop is owned by Framptons Transport Services, which runs 65 trucks and 150 trailers, with Miles as fleet engineer. “It’s not like that at all,” he continues. “You’ve got to understand what the computer is telling you and that means you need to understand the vehicle.”

He sets the scene eloquently for apprentices aspiring to become commercial vehicle technicians, and few in the industry disagree. “Being good with a computer is of little help if you have no idea how mechanical things work,” comments Scania aftersales director Mark Grant. And Volvo workshop academy manager David Spacey adds: “A fault code does not always tell you what the problem is and may well lead you up the garden path. You have got to know how a truck’s electrical system functions.”

Spacey is one among many working to dispel the myth that all technicians are diagnosticians with clean

fingerprints. “Roughly 60% to 70% of what goes on in a Volvo workshop is basic servicing, so we absolutely need people who can change oil and oil filters, and carry out statutory inspections,” he observes. “And you don’t need to be a master technician to do that.”

But there is another problem. Spacey is concerned that the pathways mapped out for apprentices once they have qualified as technicians – even the way most courses are organised – is driving them down the master technician route. “I’d like to move away from formalised courses and job titles, and start developing people according to their individual training needs,” he says.

“Not everyone wants to become a diagnostician because they don’t want the responsibility of saying that an ECU needs to be replaced when it could cost the customer £4,000–£6,000... It is also worth noting that the guys who do the bread-and-butter work are the guys who earn dealers money.”

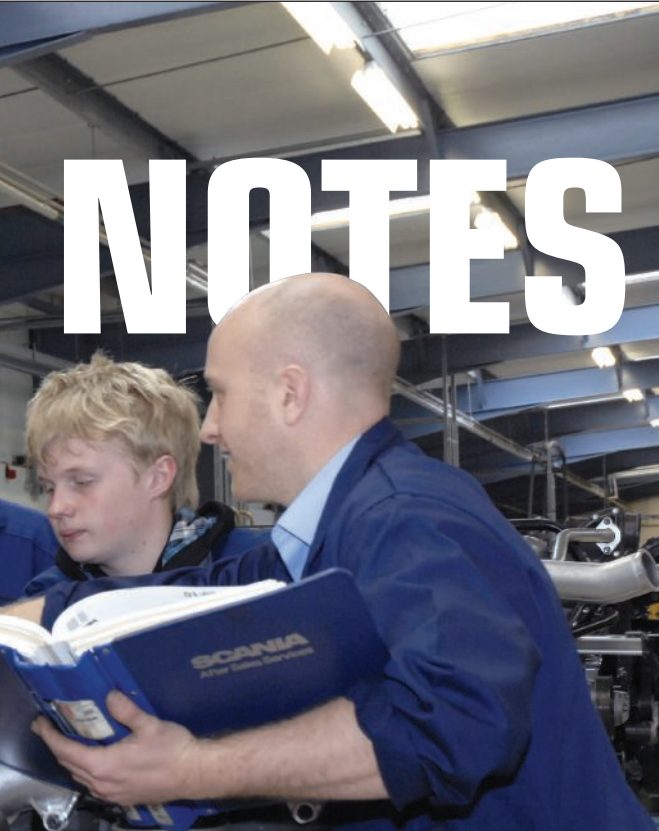
## **High flyers**

That is not to deny the importance of high-flying diagnosticians, particularly given the sophistication of today’s trucks. “You need your top technicians for sure,” agrees Mendip Truck Centre’s Miles. “But you need hands-on guys as well.”

So it’s all about getting the training mix right. A degree of diagnostics ability is required almost irrespective of the task, and the fast-changing pace of truck designs means that well-rounded CPD (continuous professional development) is vital for technicians, too. Hence the training requirements demanded by OEMs of their dealerships’ technicians.

“Every technician working at an Iveco dealership undergoes a mandatory five days training every year,”

# NOTES



comments Iveco technical training manager Kevan Woodier. “We run a four-day course on heavy truck electrical systems, for example, as well as a three-day one on light truck systems.” And, while it varies from manufacturer to manufacturer, all impose similar requirements. “One thing we also expect Scania technicians to do is some online training prior to attending courses at our training centre,” says Grant. “Time is allocated for this during the working week.”

### What do you expect?

So what should budding apprentices expect? Apprentice technicians usually undergo three years of training mainly on the job, but also education at local colleges, leading to NVQ Level 3. “Under our programme, they typically spend eight to 10 weeks annually at college in blocks of two weeks,” confirms MAN head of service and support John Davies. MAN is also moving towards irtec accreditation for all apprentices in its network. “I think it’s a good scheme that raises standards,” explains Davies.

But on-the-job training is not always plain sailing. Miles points out that it can be difficult to deliver, simply because of the pressure to get trucks back out earning money. One result is increased pressure on colleges to deliver training on modern vehicles and using trainers who are up to speed with latest technology. That way, fledgling technicians can be productive as soon as their three years are up. Volvo’s approach has been to arrange for courses run by Stephenson College to be delivered by two of its own master technicians – now college employees.

Meanwhile, structured training for apprentice technicians is regularly delivered under the auspices of training providers such as Remit, with government

### irtec accreditation

Re-launched four years ago, irtec accreditation is delivered by a partnership that includes the IMI (Institute of the Motor Industry) and IMI Awards, as well as the IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers). “We also want technicians to renew their irtec accreditation when it expires,” says MAN’s John Davies.

Such accreditation could help reinforce the status of apprenticeships at a time when almost 20% of parents would be happy to see their offspring undertake vocational training, according to research by IMI. Youngsters unhappy about the prospect of being saddled with substantial debts if they go to university appear more willing to consider becoming apprentice technicians than they were in the past.

funding through the Skills Funding Agency, Skills Development Scotland and the Welsh government. And while most day-to-day training is delivered by franchised truck dealers with selected colleges, they are not the only ones involved in schemes.

Working in conjunction with Valeo and Manchester College, Groupauto, for example, has created a three-year programme for its network of 27 Top Truck independent service workshops (which includes well-known Distington, Cumbria-based haulage and distribution specialist Tyson H Burridge).

Also, bodybuilder Cartwright is introducing trailer maintenance apprenticeships with Stockport College, aimed at providing aftersales support for its large rental fleet. “As part of the programme, apprentices will spend time in the factory and with the design team so they gain a proper understanding of how our trailers are put together,” explains Cartwright fleet services director Lawrence Todd.

That is certainly a useful development. “It used to be the case that you could use semi-skilled workers to look after trailers,” comments Miles. “But, what with EBS and air suspension, you’re talking about sophisticated bits of kit these days.”

The last word goes to IMI chief executive Steve Nash, who believes young people should look at the wealth of opportunities offered in transport engineering. “Apprentices get the chance to work in a well-paid, high-tech industry,” he advises. “And they don’t end up shackled with student debt.” **TE**