

Licensed to skill

With many irtec licensed technicians approaching the end of their five-year accreditation tenure, Brian Weatherley talks to John Parry about the IRTE scheme's package for the future

John Parry (left), the irtec steering-group chairman, has a favourite anecdote that neatly puts independent accreditation for CV technicians in context. "If you were waiting to board a plane and the captain said: 'This aeroplane has been maintained by a guy who's been doing it for years. He hasn't got qualifications but he knows how everything works, and he comes in really early.' You'd get off, wouldn't you?"

While the former DHL engineering director concedes he's tired of repeating the sketch, it underlines today's central CV maintenance issue. "Ask any member of the public if they think technicians need a licence to repair trucks, trailers, buses or coaches, and they'll be astonished when you tell them they don't," says Parry. So, with many of the 6,500-plus irtec licensed technicians approaching their five-year renewal, what better time to revisit the IRTE accreditation scheme designed to verify their competence and currency?

BACKGROUND

In 2010, as a leading advocate of technician licensing, Parry pushed for a review of irtec. While it boasted major supporters, including the Post Office, back then the scheme was essentially an in-house initiative and potential users increasingly felt it had not kept pace. "Realising the industry requirement, I just took it on myself," he recalls. "We committed to bringing it up to date. What we said was you don't tell people what they need; you need to ask them what they need - and then put something together that reflects that requirement."

As part of that scoping exercise, a questionnaire on irtec was sent to 15,000 stakeholders - and the feedback was "interesting", comments Parry. "There was general dissatisfaction among third party repairers with what was being delivered [and] even some main dealers and



“How can you have a CPC [certificate of professional competence] for an operator and a driver, but not for the guy who repairs their trucks?”

John Parry

manufacturers.” Somewhat surprising, given that the latter were providing technician training, supposedly at a high level. However, Parry reckons several courses were attendance-based, not properly assessed – although he believes this has since changed.

Parry was convinced that irtec had to be universally applicable to all maintenance providers – franchised dealers, independent companies and operators’ own workshops. More importantly, it also needed independent accreditation. Thus, in that same year, SOE (Society of Operations Engineers – the home of IRTE) joined forces with IMI (Institute of the Motor Industry) and IMI Awards, which operates a similar scheme in the retail motor industry, to create that sought-after independent assessment for irtec candidates.

Today, IMI Awards manages quality for irtec, and that includes approval of irtec testing centres, and monitoring of assessments and assessors. “It’s now fully independent,” confirms Parry. And he explains that assessments of potential irtec licensees are now carried out either by a technical training college, manufacturer or the FTA (Freight Transport Association). “They’re awarded an assessment position by IMI Awards with the IRTE setting the standard for commercial vehicles,” he explains.

‘Independent assessment’ features repeatedly in Parry’s conversation: “It’s being done by someone with no vested interest. Someone who recognises competence or skills gaps,” he says. So what happens if a technician doesn’t reach the mark? The remedy is to put the right training in place, answers Parry. “Until they’re trained to that level they won’t get a licence.”

The irtec scheme includes grades for service technician and inspection technician for trailers. For HGVs and PSVs the licence-hierarchy is: service technician; inspection technician;

advanced technician; and finally master technician. Licence costs do vary, admits Parry, but he counters: “You’ll throw away more money on waste oil than what it costs to put a technician through irtec.”

Right now an irtec licence lasts five years, which Parry believes is key to maintaining currency – including for inspection technicians. “Safety inspections are a massive part of our maintenance process. An inspection technician might develop bad habits over a five-year period so we need to restate correct procedures, as well as encouraging them to look at other aspects of the safety inspection arena.”

30,000 TECHNICIANS

The market for irtec accreditation is estimated at 30,000. “It’s a bit of a finger in the air job,” admits Parry, adding that many of the current 6,500 irtec technicians are in franchised dealers. “The strategy was to go for the manufacturers first because we could focus on them quickly,” he explains.

DAF Trucks in the UK was first to adopt irtec across its entire dealer network. “We now have more than 1,500 irtec-accredited technicians,” confirms marketing manager Phil Moon. “We see the value as providing an independent scheme that helps ensure high and consistent skill levels – particularly on annual testing and safety inspections.”

That consistency message is further underlined by the 500 DVSA (Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency) inspectors who are also now irtec licensed. Aside from the obvious message to the industry, this development ensures that DVSA staff at ATFs (Authorised Testing Facilities) are subject to the same assessments as technicians preparing the vehicles.

So, what of the future? Naturally Parry would like to see more irtec licensed technicians but he’s pragmatic regarding timescales. “No one’s saying it’s got to

be done next week. I understand people have budget constraints and that you can’t take technicians off a job at a minute’s notice. I also understand that finding someone to do the assessment might be difficult. All I want to see is someone saying: ‘There’s my plan for the next two years or 12 months’, depending how many people you’ve got.”

Understandably, one goal is increased take up among third party workshops. And the benefit? For Parry it all comes down to compliance, particularly with operators increasingly requiring repairs to be carried out by licensed technicians. That message is gaining traction. “People are now saying, if you repair my trucks you have to do it with licensed technicians. They’ve included that in their O licence submissions.”

Meanwhile, Parry reports positive feedback from a recent irtec stakeholders meeting. “One thing we’re looking at is ‘irtec Lite’ for technicians working on vehicles from 3.5–7.5 tonnes,” he says. That makes sense, not least at the heavy van end, where vehicles may not be part of an O licence but where the O licence holder remains responsible for their roadworthiness. Likewise, many 7.5-tonners are run by small own-account operators with limited knowledge of maintenance, so irtec Lite could help raise standards.

There have also been discussions with DEKRA, the German vehicle inspection company, with a view to export irtec licensing to Europe. “We’re at the early stages,” comments Parry. Meanwhile, talks have also been held with TfL (Transport for London) aimed at encouraging irtec adoption as part of CLOCS (Construction Logistics Cyclist Safety) and FORS (Fleet Operator Recognition Scheme) accreditation.

Whatever happens, Parry remains convinced that technician licensing is the best route to ensuring consistently high maintenance standards. [TE](#)