

Professional standard

As the transport industry increasingly wakes up to the importance of competence and compliance at every level, including vehicle inspection and maintenance, irtec is trending upwards. Brian Tingham reports

There is an awakening across the transport industry. Fleet operators are recognising that preparing their vehicles to meet the standards demanded by the MOT once a year is not enough. Indeed, it never has been. They see that it is just as important to match those self-same standards at each and every mandated safety inspection.

For some, such a statement will appear strange. Surely all commercial vehicle inspections serve an identical purpose – namely, to provide regular assurance of safety and compliance? So, of course they should be treated with the same rigour. Well, yes.

But, sadly, for others any such understanding has not led to action. 'Reasons' range from business pressures, frankly all the way to ignorance, even coercion. Hence in large part the disappointing numbers of 'S' marked prohibitions still being slapped on vehicles by DVSA inspectors at roadside encounters, with offending operators then hauled before the traffic commissioners.

For John Parry, who heads up the IRTE's steering group for its irtec technician licensing scheme, the key to changing hearts and minds is staring us in the face. "Anybody can get a truck through an MOT. In the end, it's just about how much money and time you

throw at it. But the reason it attracts that level of attention is not only that it's mandatory for operators' continuing use of that vehicle, but also because it's independently assessed."

INDEPENDENT ASSESSMENT

The key, he suggests, is that word 'independence'. No one can get past DVSA inspectors, either at the roadside or at MOT, precisely because they are independent. In contrast, anyone can engineer an environment that ultimately defeats even well-intentioned staff technicians. Unless, of course, they too are independently assessed for their standard of competence – and their livelihood effectively depends on maintaining that accreditation.

This, he believes, changes everything. And irtec, although still a voluntary technician licensing scheme – not yet formally a national standard – uniquely fulfils the requirement. Why? First, because its grades are assessed to the professional engineering standards of the IRTE. Second, because accredited technicians are reassessed every five years. Third, because irtec itself is subject to regular review, driven by an expert working group to ensure that it reflects current

CV MAINTENANCE VARIES WIDELY: WE MUST INSIST ON STANDARDS

Tragic incidents such as the Bath tipper truck crash in February 2015, which left four dead, should be things of the past. Safety is extremely advanced, in terms of both vehicle technology, and safety inspection and maintenance standards. And yet entirely preventable disasters still occur.

So it is time for the road transport industry to recognise that equipment and standards alone are not enough. Collectively, we must take responsibility and adopt a system of regulation that befits this important sector. One with safety at its core.

But to minimise incidents such as Bath, it is vital that regulations be based on realistic, relevant and national standards for technicians. And fundamental to these must be continuous and independent assessments delivering licensed technicians, accredited not only for their currency and competence, but also for their commitment to an ethical code.

irtec licences are awarded to technicians who continue to prove precisely these attributes. IRTE is seeing irtec registrations grow year on year as transport operators increasingly become wise to the dangers of allowing non-accredited technicians to work on their vehicles.

The risks of non-compliance are very real, as the tragedy in Bath bears witness. At stake are not only fines and operators' O licences, but also the safety of drivers and other road users.

As an industry, we must now move to self-regulate. Failure to do so risks the government stepping in.



**SOE PRESIDENT
SHAUN
STEPHENSON**

“Anybody can get a truck through an MOT. It’s just about how much money and time you throw at it. But the reason it attracts attention is not only that it’s mandatory ... but also because it’s independently assessed”

John Parry



John Parry, IRTE, pictured above (far right) at last year’s IRTE Conference

industry standards and technologies. Fourth, because it maps to workshop structures and practices.

Accordingly, enlightened operators can demand irtec as part of their service level agreements from contracted workshops. And, increasingly, they are doing just that. Not only because they know their vehicles will be in safe hands – optimally maintained for maximum efficiency and minimum downtime – but also because of the protection professional irtec standards bring to their O licences.

As a DHL spokesperson put it: “DHL requires safety and compliance from its maintenance providers as an essential part of the service delivery. As such, the irtec accreditation for technicians and/or workshops is one of the tools used in supplier selection and ongoing performance management.” He’s not saying DHL insists on irtec technicians at every one of its contracted workshops around the UK, but the writing is on the wall.

Frank Woodhead, joint managing director of F&G Commercials, which owns DAF dealerships in Barnsley, Huddersfield, Manchester and

Oldham, says he went the irtec route years ago because the benefits were so obvious. “The difference from, for example, manufacturer training, is its independence. For one thing, that means I get a validated view of the competence of my staff. For another, we can say ‘yes’ to customers such as DHL, who are asking for irtec.”

And it’s not just DHL: local fleet operators with 70–80 vehicles also now want it, reveals Woodhead. “They’re saying, ‘We accept you’re a DAF dealership but what else is there we can measure you by?’. To me, workshops that want to invest in their people and businesses will go for irtec, and those that just bumble along won’t bother. If you put your technicians through irtec, there’s no doubt about it: you stand out from the crowd.”

Clearly, technician accreditation through irtec has become a virtuous circle. All the more so since DVSA itself bought into the standard, currently completing irtec licensing for all its own vehicle inspectors. And with the traffic commissioners also on side, there will soon be no place for the naysayers to hide. **TE**

TYRE TECHNICIAN

An irtec accreditation standard for tyre technicians is about to be launched by IRTE. The news follows lobbying by the tyre industry – and particularly ATS Euromaster, NRG Fleet Services (through its tyres subsidiary Tyreforce) and Tructyre Group – over the last 18 months. Their goal: to professionalise the sector and to provide a training foundation for apprentices and time-served fitters to plug the skills gap.

“When we acquired Tyreforce, I was horrified at the lack of tyre technician standards,” explains Sid Sadique, group managing director of NRG. “Being brought up with the IRTE and irtec, I thought we must have something better.” And Glenn Sherwood, managing director of Tructyre Group, agrees: “We wanted to drive higher, universal standards across the industry.”

It’s happening: “The first practical and theoretical assessment was successfully conducted here at Banbury a few weeks ago, with two of our guys,” says Sherwood. “The irtec tyre technician assessment is now supported by Bridgestone, Goodyear and Michelin, so we’re now ready to roll,” he adds.

Sadique expects rapid take-up: “We’re going to roll irtec out across 55 technicians on the tyre side and that will grow as we expand the business... We’re also going to make irtec one of the criteria in the network agreement for our service providers. It will become a minimum requirement.” And he adds that truck operators will see the benefits in terms of compliance and quality.

It’s a similar story with training, says Sherwood, pointing to the recent approval of tyre technician apprenticeship standards, under the government’s trailblazer programme. He concedes there is still work to do, but expects irtec to feature, and training modules to be ready for April, when companies start paying the controversial Apprenticeship Levy.

For Bridgestone’s Phil Thirsk, this is the ideal outcome. Commenting on the current shortage of skilled technicians, he says getting an apprenticeship programme for tyre technicians, underpinned by a standard, has been a personal mission. “The whole tyre industry is in this together. We will have apprenticeship routes for tyre technicians and specialist tyre technicians working outside depots. And I think irtec could well provide the end point accreditation.”