

A ROLE OF MANY PARTS



Automotive parts advisors/technicians need a wide range of skills when sourcing the right parts for repair works. But how are they taught their trade, and what are the day-to-day demands of the job, asks Brian Wall

Being an automotive parts advisor/technician, or even parts manager, is much more than simply locating and selling a part to a customer or even the workshop: it's about finding the best way to get a vehicle back on the road efficiently, safely and expertly – and that takes commitment and investment.

"We have a parts team based at all of our Mercedes-Benz dealerships and many of our fleet workshops," says Chris Marsh, parts manager at dealer group Rygor. "All our parts teams, regardless of location, work together to ensure the right part gets to the right place at the right time. Typically, those who perform the vital role of automotive parts advisors/technicians will have taken the tried-and-tested route of an apprenticeship, with a formal qualification on completion."

Numerous businesses provide their own apprenticeships, in line with the company's culture and methodology. "Many of our parts advisors started as apprentices and have honed their skills within the company throughout their careers," states Marsh. "We offer the Mercedes-Benz parts apprenticeship, which is a three-year course on placement at Rygor, with weeks away at the Mercedes-Benz UK training academy in Milton Keynes. It is our commitment to our team that we will invest in their

development and expertise, so they have the knowledge and competence to carry out their roles to the highest level."

Marsh is aware, though, that apprenticeships are only one entry ticket. "One of the most important things we look for when recruiting for a parts team member is customer service skills." For them, there's an induction programme, internal courses and external training. He adds: "We will always help employees develop their skills within the business and their role – but they need to want to provide exceptional customer service."

SERVICE 24/7

As many Rygor workshops are open for extended and 24-hour operations, parts team members have to work overnight or on call. The current health crisis has also figured prominently in this regard. "We are thinking outside the box when using parts stock and, although we have robust systems in place to identify stock levels and reordering, we are currently being even more proactive to make certain that, if any parts are in high demand, we look into stockholding and movement immediately."

Component supplier Knorr-Bremse divides the parts role into two main groups: the traditional stores person, found in OEM dealers, bus garages and large fleet workshops; and distributors that supply the independent trade.

While the stores person usually knows the vehicles that need to be catered for, and the range is limited, the distributor needs to cover as wide a range of vehicles as possible, with parts available same day/next day, according to the Knorr-Bremse IAM sales team.

It adds: "Many products are becoming increasingly complex, which brings further challenges. The cost can be higher, so the quantity stocked – or even if the part is stocked at all, due to low requirement, reliability or cost – needs to be considered. Also, stores people need to keep up with the ever-changing product ranges and here training and knowledge are key. Many parts now need to be programmed/calibrated when fitted – additional tooling and diagnostics may have to be provided to avoid additional downtime. Understanding the parts and what is involved in fitting them can avoid false warranty claims."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, MOTs were suspended, vehicles parked up, and some routine maintenance was postponed. Many distributors had to react to the sharp downturn in business. Adds Knorr-Bremse: "A quick way to bring cash back into the business is to sell current stocks and not replenish, relying more on next-day deliveries from suppliers or wholesalers to provide urgent/VOR [vehicle off-road] stocks."

“All our parts teams, regardless of location, work together to ensure the right part gets to the right place at the right time”

Chris Marsh



As business levels return and MOTs restart, the difficulty is being able to react quickly to increasing demand without overstocking or understocking, thereby losing sales or, worse, having vehicles off the road.”

CAN-DO APPROACH

While IVECO does not offer an apprenticeship scheme for parts technicians, it does offer training materials online and via socially-distanced face-to-face training and coaching. But technical knowledge isn't the only requirement, states Ian Gray, IVECO parts and services aftermarket solutions country manager for the UK and Ireland. He says: “The most important skill for any parts technician is to have the correct attitude.

“I think training is a very individual thing and there is not necessarily a wrong or right approach. Parts technicians are ‘detail’ people. By this, I mean they want to see and feel the product, and fully understand the features and benefits it offers and not just read about it. So, wherever possible, face-to-face training in product and systems, such as the parts identification catalogue or pricing tools generally, provides the best results.



“As with vehicle technicians, training is something that is continuous through time, as products and practices, tools and equipment, media and legislation all change with frequency. While a parts technician may not all have the diagnostic skills of the vehicle technician, his or her knowledge is most definitely invaluable when it comes to deciding which parts are required for which repair,” Gray says.

Most parts technicians are multi-functional and often perform more than just one role in the dealership, which requires different skill sets, he continues. “For example, a parts technician will often be the person that receives the

enquiry from either the workshop or a customer, identifies the correct parts, checks for stock and, where required, organises the correct sourcing of the part,” adds Gray. That includes replenishment via daily stock orders to deliver the best first-time availability to the customer, as the customer invariably measures availability from the dealer, not the manufacturer, he observes.

NO FORMAL STANDARD

No industry standard currently exists for a parts apprenticeship, points out S&B Automotive Academy training and education director Richard Belton. But, he says, other areas fit the need, namely the ‘trade supplier’ qualification, which was written for electrical wholesalers and trade counters. When asked, how close a fit is it, he replies: “If anything, it's better than the previous parts apprenticeship that was available, as we have customised the trade supplier role to meet the specific requirements of the motor industry.”

That has brought many companies to the training provider's door: local motor factors; main automotive dealers selling to the trade and the public; bus and commercial vehicle companies that still have in-house parts depots, and main truck dealers. The government-funded Level 2 apprenticeship lasts 12 months and is provided partly at the client site, but mostly at S&B. “Of late, on account of COVID-19, it's been very much about virtual classroom delivery,” adds Belton, “but that has proved really successful and, in some ways, has its advantages.” It's helped that much of the industry has continued functioning throughout this period. Many commercial operators with their own parts counters have been busier than ever – keeping supermarkets supplied, for instance – and smaller garages are starting to reopen, with a lot more people being taken off furlough. The need for highly trained parts technicians will always be there.” 

