

Finding a way

COVID-19 lockdowns may have slowed the progress of some apprenticeships in the commercial vehicle world, but the sector has not seen the kinds of mass layoffs reported to have occurred in other sectors, at least judging from the experience of some, writes Will Dalrymple

Since the old NVQ framework format of apprenticeships wound up a few years ago, one common apprenticeship for technicians in both truck and bus/coach is the Level 3 heavy vehicle service and maintenance technician. This three-year course mixes six one-week blocks of learning at a specialist college, together with enrichment and practice (as well as labour) under supervision at an operator's depot. It also features an end-point assessment.

Running along those lines is the new heavy vehicle apprenticeship programme at fleet services company Fraikin. This month marks the first apprentice intake since 2016. They start work in its Iver, Enfield, central Midlands, Warrington and Glasgow sites.

Elsewhere, intakes continued this autumn at other ongoing schemes, including 10 apprentices joining Marshall Fleet Solutions' Level 3 qualification in refrigeration, air condition and heat pump engineering.

Earlier in the year, S&B Automotive Academy in Bristol continued the college education of existing apprentices throughout the spring lockdown remotely, as training and education director Richard Belton recalls. "Within 10 days of it being announced, we'd introduced virtual classrooms. Every block-release student continued virtually" - using a platform called Vedamo (pictured, right). This was allowed even for

those who were furloughed, he points out. But he admits that the courses' content had to shift to accommodate virtual lessons. Belton says: "For the main period, we switched to the theoretical side of the apprenticeship. Now that we are getting them back in person in small groups, we are doing more practical work. We have back-loaded the practical side and front-loaded the theory side."

One of S&B's customers is waste management firm Veolia, which contracted with the Bristol training provider a few years ago in a bid to standardise the apprentice experience across the company's 50-odd workshops.

National fleet manager Chris Grime says that he believes in the format, as it can prepare all of the technicians required by its fleet: "There's an apprenticeship that would suit every level of academic and practical achievement. In our business, repairs of the RCV technical equipment, such as the bin lift and hydraulics, are just as important as the repair and

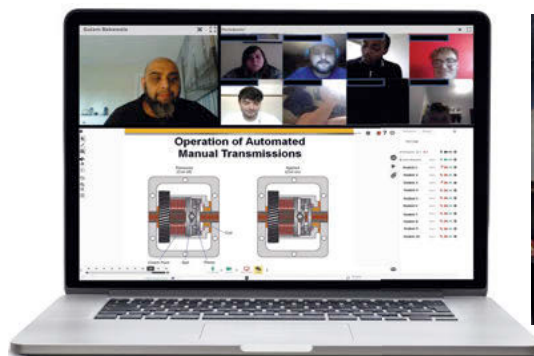


maintenance of the base chassis."

Veolia's first cohort of 12 started at S&B in 2017. But as the company's apprenticeship slots filled up, the number of new entrants declined; in 2018, it put forward eight. When numbers fell again in 2019, Veolia came up with an innovative solution: it combined its group with that of Dennis Eagle.

The RCV manufacturer operates 26 workshops across the country. Aftermarket director Geoff Rigg explains that its apprenticeship requirements had followed alongside Veolia's for a few years; both organisations contracted S&B in 2017. It needs to train about six apprentices a year. So discussions about combining the apprentice cohort 'made sense'.

He adds: "We think it works well, and there's no conflict of interest.





TRAINING IN UNIFORM

Members of the corps of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers earn qualifications while they serve. Vehicle mechanic is one of eight engineering apprenticeships. Following basic training, a 44-week advanced apprenticeship in the subject, paid at £20,000 per year, is offered. That leads to a Level 3 qualification (as well as an HGV driver's licence, potentially); further steps include a Level 4 diploma and automotive engineering HND (higher national diploma). Minimum service length is three years following education.

Both companies are interested in developing young people into industry. The fact that we have a reference to both a manufacturer and an operator just helps." Digg adds that the two companies have even discussed doing a temporary technician swap, but no action has been taken yet.

Both Veolia and Dennis Eagle apprentices are assessed against the independent third-party irtec accreditation scheme.

One difference between the two schemes is that Dennis Eagle's course lasts an extra year, and includes manufacturer-specific courses in technologies such as the body and the bin-lift. A module for its new electric refuse lorry, the eCollect, is planned. Also, its fourth-year apprentices enjoy a team-building Outward Bound experience (below).



TRAINING FOR ALL AGES

Echoing the combined experience of Veolia and Dennis Eagle, a company that has not only recently re-engineered its apprenticeship programme, but also developed continuing education option for full-time staff, is bus operator Stagecoach.

Engineering director Tony Cockcroft observes: "The main thing to look at is, does the skill-set of the engineers meet the needs of the business? I trained as a fitter when I was an apprentice. Can I repair the vehicles that we currently have in the fleet, which include hybrid and Euro VI technology? We realised that our skills training had to change. The skill-set that we had grown up with 20-30 years ago didn't fit."

A decade ago, the company engaged with manufacturers to develop training to increase technicians' knowledge and ability to diagnose complex faults, for example.

Like at Dennis Eagle, Stagecoach has modified a standard three-year apprenticeship, in this case a mechelec course for anything from 30-60 apprentices per year for its 118 depots, carried out by GTG Training. A mandatory fourth year including specialist courses such as diagnostics and electrics is managed directly by

Stagecoach and certified by IMI.

In addition, all Stagecoach apprentices must also take a three-day course on vehicle inspection developed by Stagecoach with Logistics UK, consisting of both classroom and practical elements. The course caters for three people at a time, and has run more than 40 times a year since it was developed in 2016 (in that time, more than 500 apprentices and skilled staff have been trained). Previously carried out during the fourth year, this year it has been moved up to the third year to fit in with the apprenticeship end point assessment. This provision is supplemented by other courses for staff (see also pp12-13).

COVID-19 lockdowns have interfered with Stagecoach's apprenticeship programmes, confirms engineering training manager Clare Willis. Some first- and second-years were furloughed until November, and have since returned. Third-years were initially sent on webinar learning, but now are on a break in learning. Willis explains: "We couldn't hurtle towards end point assessment when they hadn't completed all of their learning. The only way was to put the brakes on, so completion will be delayed by a few months." **TE**