



Tools and technologies for workshops aren't standing still. John Challen reviews progress around ramps, pits and testing lanes through the eyes of BT Fleet and Bullwell Trailer Solutions

Fully equipped

The growth of ATFs (Authorised Testing Facilities) has led to significant investment in equipment for commercial vehicle workshops. And that trend is mirrored not only in the growing network of new-style testing facilities, but also other workshops.

In the case of ATFs, operators keen to take advantage of the extra revenues on offer by running their own test lanes are required to purchase in the latest test equipment for checking items such as brakes, tyres and chassis systems. But when operators venture to non-ATF workshops, they have come to expect the same standard.

When it involves the big boys, the likes of BT Fleet, which operates 64 garages and manages a total network of more than 500 preferred workshops, certainly recognise the importance of having the right equipment for the job. Its workshops, which are responsible for servicing the company's fleet of 58,000 CVs – plus the thousands of external customer vehicles and BT Fleet's 10,000 company cars – are subject to continuous investment.

"We spend half a million pounds a year to maintain our workshop equipment and, as we open new workshops, it's a continual programme of ensuring that equipment is up to date," comments Mark Wolfe, director of customer service, fleet management and garage services at BT Fleets. He describes a typical BT Fleet site as housing multiple

bays, with five-tonne, two-poster ramps, four-poster ramps, brake and headlamp testers, emission analysis equipment, tyre changing and balancing machines, and anything else needed to maintain the fleet – everything up to 44-tonne artics.

Durability matters

According to Wolfe, finding the most durable equipment takes precedence over any other aspect of purchasing – followed by ensuring that equipment is maintained and in good working condition. "As a fleet management company, we do things differently to others, because we have our own network of garages. Given the amount of work they undertake on our fleet – which is under pressure to maximise its uptime – we are constantly having to monitor, maintain, fix and replace ramps, rather than just replacing them."

This isn't to say he never has requests for new workshop equipment: "If I look in my inbox now, there are orders for three new ramps for Enfield, one new ramp for Sheffield, and we are looking at new ramps in Leeds, as well as HGV brake testers in Southampton. We also now register all our garage equipment, because sometimes I think we have been throwing good money after bad. With a log of what we have, we can see, for example, that we've spent thousands of pounds on one ramp five times. And in that case, it makes sense just to replace it."



Gary Bulley went for a bespoke 18m pit for VOSA testing, to maximise throughput and accommodate longer trailers

Historically, says Wolfe, this hasn't been an approach the company has used. But he indicates that he has seen a big improvement in site operations at all of the sites since its adoption.

When it comes to ramps specifically, experience has taught Wolfe to choose very carefully. "We tend to look at value for money, rather than the cost or monetary value of the equipment," he explains. "This means we assess aspects such as what the lead time for new parts would be, if a machine went down, and what the history of the brand is within our organisation. We've used a lot of brands in the past and you soon find out that you get what you pay for," he asserts. "There are cheaper Chinese and Italian brands that can be efficient, but then a pain to get parts for. Then there are European brands."

ATF improvements

One operator to embrace the ATF route and the equipment that goes with it is Bullwell Trailer Solutions and, for managing director Gary Bulley, purchasing high quality tools is now paying dividends. "We have four service bay pits, supplied by Premier Pits, which represent a total investment of £80,000 in the last two years," he states, adding that each was specified with steel construction, jacking beams, and enough air and light to allow technicians to work effectively.

Bulley also called on Premier Pits for the firm's 26m test lane, which has an 18m pit, used for VOSA testing. "We went for a bespoke design to help ensure maximum throughput," explains Bulley. "It's five metres longer than the average 13m pit, but we are able to test up to three vehicles at one time and are fully equipped to deal with the longer trailers currently being trialled in the UK."

For those operators that installed a standard

length pit, new 15.65m trailers could certainly pose a problem. The way the extra long test lane at Bullwell's Lichfield HQ has been configured means that vehicles under test can drive straight through and out after assessment, so eliminating any safety risks – such as backing into other vehicles or even technicians. This layout also reduces movement of trailers in confined spaces, and means that productivity and efficiency can be improved.

Money talks

But none of this is cheap. "Ensuring maximum throughput for the ATF is essential, from a financial point of view, to guarantee maximum return on the charge of £800 a day for the VOSA-approved tester to be on site," comments Bulley. "Thankfully, our investment has paid off well and we are now testing an average of 55 vehicles in our ATF over four days a week."

Bullwell's MOT pass rate is also currently higher than the national average, at 93.5% – a figure that Bulley says "proves that having an on-site ATF and performing the PMI [pre MOT inspection] in the same location, and with the same equipment, really does correspond to achieving great results for our clients."

With safety in mind, Bulley says he would always favour pits over ramps. And he comments: "Ramps have the high-risk potential of crushing either the vehicle they are lifting or others in the workshop. Additionally, while they may be cheaper to install than pits, the maintenance costs – taking into account insurance safety inspections as well – are higher. Pits, on the other hand, require no maintenance: they just need cleaning. I do appreciate there is the risk of someone falling into a pit, but this is no more likely than somebody falling off the side of a raised van."

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE), meanwhile, recognises that workshop pits are inherently dangerous, which is why products to protect people in and around pits have come to the fore. Examples include aluminium pit covers, which can be retrofitted to most pits, are available in a range of sizes and are credited with cutting accident rates in workshops where they have been fitted.

As for BT Fleet, Wolfe argues that to maximise efficiency, quite apart from the workshop equipment itself, he would like to see a more automated procedure for vehicles scheduled for servicing or repair. "In the future, when a vehicle comes in, I would like to see it go through number plate recognition, with the job then being downloaded to a handheld terminal," he explains.

"The process could also be linked to a customer portal, which would allow them to see what work was being done and what time the vehicles would be ready for collection." Wolfe reveals that BT Fleet has run some tests and is looking to make "a reasonable investment" in that area soon. 