

Fix the flaws

Repair and maintenance can be costly. But vehicle downtime is one thing: far worse is the cost to life if safety fails. Laura Cork reports

There's nothing magnificent about the seven deaths that occurred in the vehicle repair sector in the last two years (2012/13 and 2013/14). Let's qualify this: the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) reports on the motor vehicle repair sector as one broad category, telling *TE* that commercial vehicle statistics have historically been difficult to draw out. However, that aside, even though the figures for the last two years include car repair sites, there is no room for complacency in our industry.

Seven fatalities, 195 major injuries and 454 injuries resulting in an absence of more than seven days: it doesn't make for comfortable reading. Nor, clearly, does it give any comfort to the technicians and managers involved. By far the most common causes are lifting and handling (21%) and slips, trips and falls (21%), with these falls being from ground level. Falls from height ranked fourth at 9%, following the third most common cause of injury, which is being struck by an object (14%).

There is always a harsh reality behind every safety statistic. And none more so than the case of Lee Baker, a 24-year-

old assistant mechanic, who died after sustaining serious injuries when he was crushed between two buses. That accident happened in October 2011 at West Midlands Travel's depot in Walsall. On 27 June last year, the company was fined £150,000 at Wolverhampton Crown Court.

VEHICLE MOVEMENTS

The court heard that, during a night shift, he was attempting to move a double-decker bus to gain access to a pit. Reverse gear wouldn't work, so he and a colleague tried to push it back to move it past a single-deck vehicle parked a few feet away. No supervisor was on duty and, tragically, the technicians weren't aware that the operator had a contract with a recovery agency not only to tow vehicles back to the depot, but also to move them within the depot.

Baker went into the cab of the vehicle, which had an automatic safety device to engage the parking brake when the doors were open. Instead of selecting neutral, he inadvertently left it in drive. When he got off and closed the doors, the brake disengaged after three seconds and the bus began to

move towards the two men in front of it. His colleague jumped out of the way; Baker wasn't so lucky. He was crushed between the two buses. He never regained consciousness and died three months later.

HSE inspectors found that West Midlands Travel had failed to perform a suitable risk assessment for buses to be moved manually. They also found that employees had not been trained in a safe system of work for moving buses manually. The operator had allowed the practice of pushing vehicles during the night shifts.

The court heard that this lack of a clear, safe system of work - and the absence of a supervisor - had led to a workaround being devised. As it turned out, not much of a solution. The failings of West Midlands Travel, said HSE inspector Eve-Marie Edwards after the hearing, had "contributed significantly" to the young man's death.

"There was no supervisor on duty to advise Mr Baker or to ensure that no attempts were made to move a bus without somebody at the wheel, or to advise him to call the recovery agency to move it," she added. "The company has since introduced a number of safety measures to prevent a recurrence."

The case demonstrates that it's not just having the right equipment in a workshop that makes it a safe working environment. Strong systems and procedures need to be in place, and these must be checked and reassessed regularly to ensure they are being adhered to.

HSE statistics for 2012/13 and 2013/14

7 fatalities • 195 major injuries • 454 injuries resulting in absence of more than 7 days

Most common causes: lifting and handling accidents, 21% • slips, trips and falls, 21% • struck by an object, 14% • falls from height, 9%

Ideally, pit openings should always be covered when a vehicle is not in place - and even if a vehicle is over the pit, you should cover any remaining exposed areas where possible



While an extensive range of equipment is used to repair and service vehicles, it's the pits and lifts providing easy access for technicians that can present safety hazards - and most commercial vehicle workshops employ a combination of the two. There are some, however - notably a couple of major bus operators - that prefer to stick with lifts. Wireless column lifts, in particular, have proved popular, thanks to the lack of cables that could otherwise cause a trip hazard.

Early last year, Go North East (part of the Go Ahead Group) specified nine sets of Stertil Koni wireless mobile column lifts, as part of a larger order to kit out its new Gateshead Riverside depot. Rated individually at 7.5 tonnes, the ST1075FWF lifts come in sets of four and can be used in pairs or

multiplies for buses with more axles. The operator decided against pits for its new site, believing that lifts would provide more flexibility and improve workshop safety.

PITS OR LIFTS

However, lifting equipment does need to be maintained regularly and, according to Mel Burrell, managing director and founder of Premier Pits, this is just one of the key plus points for pits. Compared with a pit installation, upfront costs for lifts are unquestionably cheaper, but they're not a 'fit-and-forget' option.

Pit installation can also take place without need for additional headroom in a workshop. But it's the potential time savings that he believes many overlook: "The advantages of pits far outweigh

those of lifts when it comes to a straightforward inspection," he insists. "It can take several minutes to raise a vehicle on a lift and, as we all know, time is money."

HSE's guidance document (HSG261) for vehicle repair and associated industries states that "an assessment of workplace risks may well show that [inspection pits] are the safest option when working on diesel-fuelled vehicles". To maximise safety, however, access must be restricted to people who need to be there. Drivers, for example, may believe they don't pose a risk, but, if they are allowed to walk around the workshop, accidents will happen. Ideally, pit openings should always be covered when a vehicle is not in place - and even if a vehicle is over the pit, you should cover any remaining exposed areas where possible.

There is a range of covers available, including from pit installers. Top of the list are motorised covers, which offer maximum protection with minimal maintenance. They also allow for the vehicle to be moved into position before the cover is retracted, then reinstated with a push of the button before the vehicle is moved off.

Retractable (or recoil) safety barriers are another option and, says Burrell, their simplicity and high visibility makes them "one of the best, most cost-effective health and safety products". Premier Pits' range is available in 12m-, 14m- or 16m-long versions and, like others on the market, the visible barrier can remain in place while the vehicle is over the pit, just by unhooking the chain between the end posts.

"We supplied these to a truck and bus brand for 36 of its garages about eight years ago, and they're still in use today," says Burrell.

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Sites that make the grade are included on the online register of IRTE-accredited workshops for three years. To apply for accreditation, contact irteworkshop@soe.org.uk, or, to view the list of accredited facilities, go to: www.irteworkshop.org.uk/irte-workshop-accreditation-register