

# OLD SCHOOL



Stagecoach's national bus operation employs some 20,000 people across 120 UK sites and 20 operating companies, of which only 1,000-1,100 are skilled technicians keeping its fleet of buses running. In comparison, the majority of employees, including drivers, inspectors and managers, are in bus operations.

Within such a large company, many formal training courses exist. One of the smallest is a two-year graduate training programme for future managers, though it also offers IMI-accredited underpinning knowledge programmes for engineering managers and supervisory staff.

For technical roles, there are some 150 apprentices engaged in a three-year MechElec bus and coach Level 3 trailblazer apprenticeship at any one time. Each year's tuition includes nine one-week blocks at provider GTG Training (which operates in Wolverhampton and Glasgow); the rest of the time is spent back at the

**Concerned about a growing engineering skills gap in its workshops, Stagecoach has begun to recruit technicians from a new source of applicants - its own employees. Will Dalrymple reports**

workplace reinforcing the learning with on-the-job tasks. Apprentices must pass assessments at the end of each year.

On top of this, its standard training scheme for apprentices, the company tacks on a fourth year of manufacturers' courses to hone their skills. This scheme primarily recruits school leavers, although, in common with other new-style trailblazer groups, there is now no age limit.

The intake is calculated based on expected future work demand, based on the exact turnover of staff, growth opportunities, fleet contract expansions and contractions. All of those judgements, taken at depot level, are agglomerated into a national training need.

However, despite providing some 30 qualified technicians a year, the programme is still not large enough to

satisfy internal demand. Stagecoach UK bus engineering director Sam Greer states: "We are faced with a backdrop of the employment market. Recruiting and retaining skilled technicians is challenging."

## LOOKING WITHIN

So, in addition to looking outside, Stagecoach has begun looking within, to convert existing company employees into workshop technicians. Doing so has the second benefit of offering staff an opportunity for personal, and professional, development by being trained in a different skillset. No surprise that the offering has been welcomed by staff and the trade union.

The first intake, in March 2018, recruited 24 apprentices from 143 applicants. A second selection process, which started in January 2019, recruited

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Clare Willis

about 30 apprentices from 207 applicants.

Purely on balance of numbers alone, that means most candidates would be drivers (with smaller numbers of non-skilled and semi-skilled engineering staff). Adds Greer: “We have significant turnover in driving staff; we are always training and recruiting them. It’s the place where we are capable and well-skilled in being able to replenish them.”

Advertising for its Trade Up apprenticeship starts internally in each location. Interested candidates pass through an initial selection process, then have to take standard literacy, numeracy and mechanical comprehension tests. Those who succeed go through a second selection process.

The tests have been a stumbling block for many applicants, states Clare Willis, deputy training and development manager (engineering). That’s not because they are less able than trailblazer apprentices, but because it’s been such a long time since they were in school.

This point highlights a key aspect of the programme. Technical skill levels aside, the two groups couldn’t be more different. Describing the Trade Up candidates, Greer observes: “One thing that comes through loud and clear, even in our initial experience, is that they have more life experience. They are more settled. They relish the opportunity given to them, to develop personally and to acquire a new skillset. They are generally more positive in their outlook.”

By contrast, Willis describes the trailblazer apprentices as “having no foundation skills. They are generally young people out of schools and colleges, and it’s their first venture in employment and training. The others have worked with us for a period. They may have some skills, or previous experience, or even be semi-skilled, or they came to us without a driving licence and we trained them up. Whatever

category they fall into, they were existing employees that have migrated.

“We recognise that with some of the people on Trade Up, there is a difference of age; they have been with the business for a long period, so they start at a different point in the year.” Depending on the location, both types of apprentices may work side by side in the workshop; course content is identical.


One tricky matter vital to the success of Trade Up was the wage structure of the second-life apprentices; experienced, long-tenure employees would have possibly built up a much larger income than a school leaver, who starts from a lower relative base.

The solution agreed was that employees on a Trade Up course retain their previous salary until they gain new skills. Their pay would then rise incrementally with apprenticeship milestones, such as success in the required end-of-year assessments.

“The pay disparity between first-year apprentices and Trade Up apprentices could be a big gap, but it is important that people coming on to the scheme weren’t worse off,” contends Willis.

Having developed the scheme, Stagecoach is not standing still. It plans to develop an annual awards scheme for Trade Up apprentices, just like the one currently offered for trailblazer apprentices at the Etihad stadium in Manchester. And the company’s Outward Bound programme for apprentices will also be reinstated.

After a few more intakes, numbers of Trade Up and trailblazer apprenticeships will level out, and the number of employees training toward technical grades will total some 300 people. That will meet internal demand in Stagecoach’s new strategic growth plan, states Greer.

Concludes Willis: “We need to keep growing our own. Our plan is to continue. Trade Up offers an additional pool of people.” 



**DAVID WYNN,  
GENERAL GARAGE  
OPERATIVE, NOW  
FIRST-YEAR TRADE UP  
APPRENTICE:**

“From leaving school, I was an HGV apprentice and diesel fitter at 16. But the company went bust, so I started working as a bus driver in 1987 – it was paying more money than fitting at the time. I worked as a driver until 1995, when an opportunity came up in engineering as a breakdown mechanic: changing lightbulbs, topping up water, keeping the fleet on the road. At that time I also obtained a Level 2 NVQ in engineering.

“As the buses progressed, there were fewer breakdowns. And there were opportunities to move inside the garage [Walkergate, Newcastle upon Tyne] as a semi-skilled worker. I also wanted to get back to engineering, as driving was stressful and rules and regulations were changing rapidly. In the garage, I did servicing work; oil changes, greasing and oiling. I did that until last March.

“Then, I was looking to move up to a supervisory role, but I needed a trade behind me before I could move up. So I applied to the Trade Up scheme. The company provides everything for me to be able to do the apprenticeship, including accommodation and travelling expenses – I am in Wolverhampton this week at college, as I am for about ten weeks a year. Back in Walkergate, a mentor in the garage looks after all of the apprentices and the jobs that they need to complete to finish their apprenticeship. It is much more challenging work than before – for example, previously I would strip down engines, but I wasn’t allowed to put them back together; now I can.”