

# Licence to skill

**The independent third-party assessment scheme reassures heavy vehicle operators that workshop technicians are competent to fix their vehicles. But as licences only last for five years, operators need to make sure that technicians reaccredit in time, writes Will Dalrymple**

**W**hile the irtec technician licensing scheme might have started as a customer requirement, over the years it has become ever-more integrated into workshop staff management structures, at least judging from the testimony of truck rental firm Fraikin, bus operators Arriva and National Express, truck dealers Rygor Group and Scania and training provider GTG.

As the UK imposes no legal minimum requirements for heavy vehicle technicians, irtec provides an independent assessment of technician competence at four levels (service and maintenance technician, inspection technician, advanced technician and master technician). Assessment may be either through third-party assessments, or certification of internal assessors. Once achieved, however, irtec licences only last five years. Which is why some of the first adopters of the relaunched irtec scheme have now completed technician reassessments. Others' plans, delayed by COVID, will roll out later this year.

Regardless of level, an irtec reassessment is in fact exactly the same as a first-time assessment. Generally speaking, that consists of a multiple-choice exam taken on a computer for underpinning knowledge, followed by a number of practical assessments taken in person around a vehicle in a workshop. Even though the course content is the same, many stated that reassessments proved to be less demanding the second time around

because candidates knew what to expect. "They aren't afraid of us this time," jokes Scania trainer Steve Walker.

Still, practices differ about the degree of preparation offered to technicians for the reassessment. For example, bus operator Arriva assesses London-based technicians at its IMI-recognised Edmonton, north London depot, which also hosts its training academy (see also [www.is.gd/enajen](http://www.is.gd/enajen)).

Arriva engineering development manager Wayne Ellis states that plans to reassess some 150 technicians for irtec (mostly to the service and maintenance technician level) began in late 2019, were interrupted last year, but are now on track to start this year. Candidates are sent straight to Edmonton for the SMT reassessment.

However, if any fall short, they are



put in for the company's national engineering development programme, which includes courses in electronics, engineering and specialist systems (SCR, doors, ramps, chassis, brakes); then they are reassessed on irtec. (In these pandemic-straightened times, these courses have been adjusted to cater for just a couple of technicians in a single workshop, Ellis notes).

This approach helps fill a generation gap, Ellis observes. More traditionally-minded workshops have tended to





keep technicians within their original discipline: mechanical, electrical or bodywork. However, since irtec is a multidisciplinary test, it reaches across those boundaries, requiring electrical skills of mechanics, and vice versa, and so flags up skills weaknesses.

In addition, Arriva doesn't just stop at the SMT level of irtec. First, the company's dedicated vehicle examiners are accredited to inspection technician level. Those working as vehicle inspectors are put up for reaccreditation.

If garages require additional inspectors, Arriva's standardised technician training needs analysis will be the basis for finding new candidates. That analysis is carried out with every Arriva engineer and his or her manager across five regions in England and Wales. Accreditations such as irtec are taken into account; high-scoring individuals are put forward for the irtec advanced technician accreditation.

Originally set up by demand from customer Transport for London, the irtec scheme is currently only limited to London, although the national bus operator also runs fleets elsewhere in the country. It is looking at the costs and logistics of spreading the scheme to other regions, Ellis reports.

Later this year, Mercedes-Benz dealer group Rygor will put technicians through the company's first irtec recertifications. Reflects director Paul Reed: "We will be looking into the best and most importantly, safest way we can carrying re-certification out, in light of the current pandemic." The company carries out renewals in partnership with its training provider.

#### **MULTIPLE BENEFITS**

He adds: "irtec gives our technicians an industry-recognised certification, which on top of their manufacturer qualifications, ensures they have the skills to keep our customers safe and on the road. It also demonstrates to our customers how highly-skilled our technical team is, and it is also something we look for when recruiting new team members to our service departments. Furthermore, it demonstrates the real importance we place on investing in our team and their development, to ensure they are confident and competent in their roles."

Across 11 authorised workshops (including the new Heathrow truck centre, pictured above), plus six fleet workshops, it employs 200 technicians. Each year, Rygor runs two irtec

inspection technician assessments, and aims to assess new technicians within 12 months of joining the business. In addition, technicians undertake Mercedes-Benz training every year, including a maintenance and system technician programme.

Meanwhile, commercial vehicle rental group Fraikin is planning a group of technician reaccreditations next year, reports group talent & learning director Ant Perfect. He says: "The reason why we chose it [four years ago] is that we hadn't recognised professional development in this particular talent pool. For many years, our technicians have been the unsung heroes of our business. During the pandemic last year, they were tireless in turning up and keeping customer businesses working. It's good for us to know the level of competence and skill that they have; and to know that, through irtec, those levels are high."

And where they aren't, Fraikin acts, asserts Perfect. "Assessment results indicate where there are dips in competence, and we do engage with those technicians and their line managers. If development plans are needed to plug the gap, we draw them up. This is not box-ticking; we take this

seriously, the long-term development of our technician workforce.”

Like Arriva, Fraikin assesses to the irtec service maintenance technician level. But to do that, it draws on the services of GTG Training (pictured below are automotive development coach Chris Stacey, at left, and automotive team leader Sam Duckers).

Fraikin’s work for GTG, like those of an increasing number of GTG customers, include not only the assessment but also familiarisation training beforehand, according GTG department manager John McCulloch. He explains: “When we started, our failure rates were large, across the board, for silly things. Not because of lack of knowledge, but because they were coming into an alien environment; they were nervous.”

### REFRESHERS

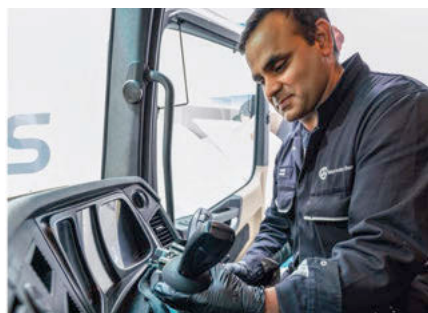
For a decade or so, the training company, which has sites in Scotland and the West Midlands, has offered one or two days of refresher before the assessment. This includes a mix of classroom and practical orientation, with an eye toward the less-frequent repairs. Classroom work might include reviewing the DVSA inspection manual, updates on regulatory changes and an explanation of the OCRS enforcement scheme. As to that latter subject, “guys who have just come off the tools wouldn’t know anything about this because they don’t need to,” observes GTG trainer Iain King.



Practical work might include some workshop demonstrations explaining any potentially-unfamiliar tooling, such as a beam jack or digital DTI gauge. (For similar reasons, Arriva also does a day’s familiarisation for the advanced technician assessment that is likely to call upon the more specialised tools; Rygor offers a refresher day too).

The purpose of this is not to cram for the test, the GTG trainers point out; apart from anything, they have no way to know what subjects will come up from the large online question bank. It’s more to review the less common activities and repairs. “They know the stuff, but they don’t know they know it,” observes sales manager Graeme Findlay.

Another happy customer of GTG is National Express. Lee Sanford, bus engineering training manager at National Express, praises the in-depth knowledge of GTG instructors. As for irtec, Sanford describes it as ‘crucial’ to ensuring that its vehicle inspectors carry out inspections ‘to the same consistent high standard’. It uses irtec inspection technician to assess all of its inspectors, as well as most of the



mechanical technicians. That amounts to 90 employees in total. In fact, holding an irtec accreditation is an internal requirement for carrying out inspections at the operator.

Like Fraikin, National Express includes familiarisation training days before assessments. But unlike Fraikin, it reassesses technicians in three, rather than five-year, increments. Sanford explains: “Even though this builds in additional costs to putting staff through the scheme, it ensures that all our licensed staff have up-to-date knowledge and their inspection skills are still at an incredibly high level.”

For staff such as body maker Jag Singh, pictured above, or fitter Dave Hughes (pictured, p23), Sanford reports that irtec is just one of many elements of development, all of which are recorded in a corporate training and competence matrix. He adds that a new addition to staff training is higher levels of irtec: advanced technician and master technician. “The uptake on this so far has been good, with 20 people taking the advanced course, and six have now been through the master technician course. More are planned at both levels during the course of 2021 and beyond.”

Although truck OEM Scania doesn’t use GTG for training, it does include a pre-assessment course. That runs for three days, according to technical training manager Dean Rippon, and involves both company trainers and apprenticeship provider Remit Group. The company has a goal that all technicians, whether employed by Scania’s wholly-owned dealers (amounting to some 1,200), or by

***“Even though this builds in additional costs to putting staff through the scheme, it ensures that all our licensed staff have up-to-date knowledge and their inspection skills are still at an incredibly high level”***

Lee Sandford

independents (another 1,800 or so) will be accredited to irtec inspection technician over the next two years. It chose that level because ‘everyone is doing inspections’, argues Rippon, although in the last few years it has also done advanced and master technician assessments as well.

Rippon admits that COVID-19 has altered its recertification plans. He says: “We had planned to do a recert last year that would have been face-to-face. We have converted that to a virtual classroom. We would possibly have done that face to face and included the assessment as part of that.

“But with things having changed, it’s easy to roll out virtual classrooms quickly. And it’s better; whereas before everyone was travelling down to one location, now we can get information out quite quickly in a couple two-hour virtual sessions. That is saving the Scania network lots of money.”

In fact, Rippon admits that COVID-19’s social distancing requirements have totally altered the face of company training. Over the past few months, it has been working to move many face-to-face training courses online, using Microsoft Teams as the software platform. “Rather than a traditional course, which you sit over two to three days, you learn over a longer period in bite-size chunks.” A typical course might be two hours, consisting of up to 40 minutes of screen time, followed by an activity. (An example is finding something in the online inspection manual provided by its r2c Online workshop software).

To support this offering, the company is planning to send additional laptop computers to depots that will be dedicated to training; its target is two laptops per depot by the start of this month. **TE**

## IRTEC ELECTRIC

irtec electric is a module for the irtec technician accreditation that covers safe isolation of an electric vehicle (its full title: ‘large electric vehicle high voltage isolation, reinstatement and safety’). Scania was involved in the launch of the scheme last year, and accredited two technicians in March (pictured right and below).

Although plans have been held up by COVID and delays in receiving full-electric heavy vehicles, they are still proceeding. From a health and safety point of view, the company has nearly finished writing risk assessments for technicians, and there are currently five part-electric powertrain vehicles (hybrids) in the UK. A basic corporate e-learning document about electric vehicles has been published for all of the company’s staff; its technicians are scheduled to receive a more in-depth e-learning document by the middle of the year. Before mid-summer, it is looking to train 10 technicians at its Purfleet, Essex depot to a level that will include assessment on irtec electric. Looking farther in the future, it hopes to have trained two technicians at every UK depot in about two years’ time.

As of mid-January, Scania staff were planning training to run alongside these, but had not decided what elements of the courses will be delivered in-house and which will come from external providers. But Rippon is clear that the company has the highest standards in mind for them: candidates will face psychometric and aptitude testing. “Not every technician is capable of becoming an EV technician. They have to go through a selection interview and also the right frame of mind,” he says, adding: “We have to make sure that they follow set procedures and protocols, because there’s a big [safety] implication if they get it wrong.”

To enhance workplace safety, technicians also always work with a buddy when carrying out repairs, in case something goes wrong. Workshops must set up dedicated separate working areas for EVs. And the equipment is different too: anti-static overalls and tools, padlocks to lock off the systems. “We don’t want to take any risks,” sums up Rippon.

Others are gearing up for EVs too. GTG has trained staff, and procured equipment and a vehicle, and from late spring plans to offer a two-day familiarisation course for hybrid and electric vehicles.

Lee Sandford at National Express participated in the irtec electric licence, and is now planning EV training for technical staff. That will be initially the IMI level 2 and 3 heavy hybrid electric vehicle qualifications, “in order to give them a good fundamental understanding of the technology,” he says. He adds that he is also considering using irtec electric in future.

Fraikin, also, is in the planning stages. Perfect says that it will definitely consider electric vehicle training and irtec electric in future. “We need to keep technicians current. If the fleet is moving to electric [vehicles], we need to have the skills and understanding to deliver maintenance on those.”

