

The list of operators that have used the irtec testing and assessment scheme, run by IRTE (Institute of Road Transport Engineers) and aimed at helping technicians gain recognition, reads a little like a who's who of the transport world. Royal Mail, TNT, John Lewis Partnership, First Bus, Northgate plc, Biffa and Balfour Beatty are just a few of the large-scale operators that have made the decision to send their technicians for irtec assessment.

The irtec scheme is aimed at mechanics working with PCV, heavy goods and light commercial vehicles. There are three levels of qualification that, between them, assess theoretical and practical skills, while emphasising the safety ethic and ongoing professional development of engineers. At present, there are around 2,800 irtec licensed technicians in the industry, with the majority of large firms recognising their value.

IRTE makes the point that achievement of such qualifications gives employers and managers confidence in the quality of people working for them. It also provides insurance companies with an assurance of best engineering practice and professional expertise.

It has been an eventful couple of years in the life of irtec. At the CV Show in 2008, Nick Jones, chief executive of the Society of Operations Engineers (SOE), addressed those gathered in Birmingham's NEC, and revealed news that would give technicians further confidence and commitment to their work. Under an agreement between the IRTE and the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI), the two organisations announced a joint initiative to promote and improve the irtec licensing scheme.

At the time, Jones said: "This agreement between the IRTE and the IMI will allow us to make major headway in generating further take-up of irtec and strengthening it for the future. By harnessing the expertise and experience of the IRTE in the commercial vehicle sector, particularly in relation to standards, and the administrative and developmental support of the IMI, this will be a strong and valuable partnership, while we will remain wholly independent organisations."

irtec's future

That agreement has taken time to come to fruition, but now the IMI and its qualifications subsidiary IMI Awards will be responsible for managing the quality assurance process for the irtec scheme. This will include approving new testing centres, monitoring assessments and assessors, and working with other relevant qualification bodies.

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Quality qualification

As the voluntary technician licensing scheme irtec prepares to enter a new phase, with IMI and IRTE working to seal their collaboration, John Fife finds out what operators think



The early train

More than ever, education and training must be regarded as integral parts of any organisation. Indeed, many believe that employees should be taught at the first opportunity, while they are still in the mindset of school and have a willingness to learn.

Furthermore, technological progress is so rapid these days that workshop practices have to be constantly monitored to keep pace with the arrival of new machines, new methods and newly qualified, eager young staff.

In 2008, the government pledged £1 billion to regenerate apprenticeships and encourage more businesses to take on school leavers, and young men and women. Currently, there are around 130,000 businesses that offer apprenticeships to 16–18 year olds across the UK, but just one in 15 is on an apprenticeship scheme. Under the latest initiative, the government hopes to increase this figure to one in five over the next 10 years.

In addition to practical apprenticeship training, universities, colleges and further education centres all have a part to play. Apparently, over the past 10 years there has been a drop of 8% in the number of registered engineers in the UK, no doubt reflecting the decline of manufacturing industry in this country.

So, while apprenticeships and education are vital, so, too, are the correct qualifications. NVQs, for instance: these are highly valued qualifications within industry, but they should be regarded as first steps towards career progression, not an end to education.



The IRTE and IMI will also work together in order to develop future irtec assessments, as well as new National Occupational Standards and vocational qualifications for the commercial vehicle sector.

Paul Price, from REMIT (REtail Motor Industry Training), recently combined both the IMI diploma with irtec qualification when teaching a course for Chatfields, the new and used truck and van dealer outfit. “We are looking to promote irtec any way we can, as well as update the knowledge of the candidates across the board,” says Price. “The scheme provides an enhanced insight into what is

going on in the field of technician training and we help make them understand that you can’t take anything for granted in this industry.”

“We recognised that no other commercial vehicle repairers had taken up irtec and, at the time, [traffic commissioner] Beverley Bell was very vocal about repairers having a quality standard, rather than ISO,” adds Hugh Teesdale, dealer principal at Chatfields’ Stockton and Birtley operations.

Teesdale says he was impressed by Price’s work, as well as the enthusiasm from his technicians. “We were given an initial allocation of 25 technicians and asked people to volunteer for the scheme,” he explains, revealing that there were far more people that applied than spaces available.

Confidence at Chatfields

The plan for Chatfields is to ensure that all of its 200-plus technicians complete the irtec scheme by the end of the year, says Teesdale. “It has refreshed the skills, especially of our senior technicians, and provided a new training medium, in the form of the Internet,” he states. “It has made them think more about the job they are doing and goes to prove that you have to have continuous training of individuals, especially technicians.”

Another success story for irtec is the transport services division of the London Borough of Redbridge, which recently put its technicians up for assessment. Redbridge wanted something to fill the gap between extra-curricular activities and the variety of courses offered through the organisation as an Investor In People (IIP). Engineering manager Eddie Cross also believes that his investment in irtec will pay off, when Redbridge is servicing its 312-strong vehicle fleet. “My aspiration is that the standard will be recognised by the customers, giving the technicians recognition for keeping our fleet the best in London,” he asserts.

Cross also says he wanted the process to be seamless, and this wish was granted after assessors from the Stoke-on-Trent college pitched up on site and were able to schedule the courses around the workload. **TE**

