

Is National Express living up to its 'People' value?

An independent progress report

Tom Harris May 2017



In 2015 I was invited by National Express to undertake a review of the extent to which the company was living up to its own 'People' value, and to assess what progress was being made against its stated commitment to valuing its employees. The review was carried out in early 2016, with visits to National Express's various business interests in Spain, the US and the UK. My report was submitted later that spring.

In a foreword to that report, Dean Finch, National Express Group Chief Executive, reaffirmed the company's commitment to the 'People Value' that underpins its business, a commitment "to develop the talents, reward the exceptional performance and respect the rights of all National Express employees". Specifically, Dean wrote, this commitment included "an ambition to be an 'employer of choice' with employees widely regarded as leaders in their field. It contained commitments: to pay the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage, or at least 10% above the national minimum wage where a national Living Wage doesn't exist; for all drivers to have an Institute for Advanced Motoring – or local equivalent – accreditation as part of a 'World Class Driver' programme; and for all technicians to have a similar accreditation to a Master Technician level.

"The determination to invest in our staff in such a way", Dean added, "is driven by our People Value but also by a recognition that to grow, to meet the changing demands of our customers and to harness new technology, we must all continually strive to be even better."

My review concluded that while National Express was, overall, a good company whose employees enjoyed working for it and who felt, on the whole, valued as individuals and as a workforce, there was room for improvement, which I listed in the report as a series of recommendations. It is to National Express's credit that it has set itself, through its corporate leadership, an ambitious target level to aim for in terms of its stated values, 'People' being one of the most important of these.

This 2017 review was carried out, for practical and organisational reasons, as largely a 'desktop' exercise, where information was submitted to me from diverse parts of the company, and interviews conducted by telephone rather than in face-to-face settings. Despite this initial disadvantage, however, I believe I have been able to make an objective assessment of some of the main achievements of National Express in the past year, and of the prime challenges it faces in the year ahead.

In a two-week period, I took part in telephone discussions with a number of individuals throughout the National Express family, including:

- Juan Antonio Esteban, Director of Human Resources, ALSA, Spain;
- Pablo Gonzalo, who organises the ALSA employee biennial employees survey;
- Diego Buenestado of the UGT transport union;
- Tyrone Kanzaki, driver with Durham Bus Services in Iowa and official of the Amalgamated Transit Union;
- Leigh Reddington of TNS (National Express's employment engagement partner in North America);
- Eugene Collins, business agent for American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Indianapolis;
- Graeme Cohen, VaLUENTIS (responsible for the UK employee survey);
- Alan (Casey) McNeil, chairman of local Unite branch, Perry Barr; and
- Amanda Jones, Human Resources Director, UK Coach.

The focus of the review has been primarily on following up the recommendations contained in its predecessor publication and assessing what progress, if any, has been made in addressing them. Secondly, I have chosen also to focus particularly on the Master Driver, Master Technician and DriveCam initiatives as case studies to assess the progress – or otherwise – that National Express has made in the last year. Lastly, I have attempted to identify the challenges National Express and its workforce may face in the year ahead and assess how prepared the company is to meet them.



ALSA, Spain

ALSA is the leading company in the Spanish road passenger transport sector, and was acquired by National Express in 2005. With over 100 years' experience, it operates long-distance, regional and urban bus and coach services across Spain and in Morocco. Apart from its bus and coach services, the business also operates service areas and other transport-related businesses, such as fuel distribution.

ALSA continues to enjoy the reputation of being Spain's primary employer of choice among Spanish coach and bus drivers. The healthy and valuable management – trade union relationship noted in the previous report continues; this is fundamentally based on a mutual respect and acceptance by union officials that ALSA management can be trusted to implement and respect negotiated agreements. Further, there has been solid progress made on intra-workforce communications and training. Nevertheless, the economic and political context in Spain presents challenges which management will have to develop new strategies to meet. There have been welcome improvements in the results of the regular (biennial) employees' survey, although in many areas, Spain (and Morocco) continue to lag significantly behind the company's other geographical locations.

The 2016 review made a number of recommendations, including making efforts by ALSA management "to improve its relationship with the trade unions through continual co-operation and by stepping up efforts to inform the workforce of new initiatives at an early stage in order to win their full co-operation, support and participation. This would contribute to a sense among employees that they have a genuine stake in the future direction of the company." This was in light of the impact of previous industrial action that had significantly affected some services.

The findings of the latest (2016) biennial staff survey for employees in Spain and Morocco suggest a consistent and clear improvement in all areas surveyed. For example, employee engagement with the survey itself has risen from 55% in 2012 to 59% in 2014, and to 64% in 2016. Similarly, the number of respondents agreeing with the statement, "I would recommend my company as a good place to work" has risen from 62% in 2014 to 74% in 2016.

A significant increase in the number of employees who agree with the statement, "Safety is taken seriously in my business" was recorded (80% in 2016, compared with 67% four years previously), and in 2016, 71% agreed with the statement, "I enjoy working for my business", compared with 61% in 2012.

There was a less impressive rise over the four-year period in response to the statement, "I have received the training I need to do my job": while 71% agreed, this showed a modest increase of only 3% on the figure for 2014 and a 5% increase since 2012.

While ALSA has seen definite improvements in all the above areas, however, it should be noted that in comparison with the same survey questions posed to National Express employees in North America, in the UK Bus sector, UK Rail and at corporate levels, ALSA scored consistently the lowest levels (apart from "I would recommend my company as a good place to work", where agreement was seven points higher than among UK Bus employees and equal to the level of agreement expressed by UK Rail staff). While ALSA management can be credited with consistent improvement in general morale and job satisfaction among its employees, it still has some way to go to catch up with other parts of the National Express global family.

This, however, could well be influenced by national (Spanish and Moroccan) economic and cultural factors which are outside the remit of this report.

However, ALSA rightly points out that the question asking workers if they would like to still be working at ALSA in five years' time received 85% of positive answers – the best global rating so far.

ALSA management is conscious of the challenge posed to the industry by national (Spanish) political developments and the aspiration of workers to recover the ground they perceive to have lost since the 2008 financial crash. They have therefore fostered the continuation of excellent institutional relationships with the unions through ongoing meetings. A new system of performance-related improvements is also being considered as part of a wider strategy to secure productive and positive industrial relations.

Research by ALSA also indicates encouraging levels of increased participation in social events sponsored by the company, such as employee attendance at the Avenida de América site for the Family Day at Christmas. The company has also seen success at employee recognition events, such as the 'End of the Driving League' at the Jarama Race Circuit, and the largest ever number of nominations for ALSA's Values Awards.

From conversations with both ALSA management and trade union representatives, it is clear that a positive working relationship is being maintained and strengthened in the face of national (Spanish) political and economic developments. Diego Buenestado of the UGT transport union believes that ALSA's positive reputation in the country as a whole is confirmed by the fact that the company is seen as an employer of choice. The company's commitment to applying rigorous safety standards is respected by the unions and their members.

The UGT (in common with other transport unions) is cautiously supportive of the roll-out of the DriveCam initiative, provided it is used exclusively to enforce the drivers' safety and security, rather than be used as a means of disciplining drivers.

The 2016 review recommended that ALSA avoid complacency in respect of its dominant position in the bus market as an employer of choice, and that it should "prepare for better economic times, whether or not those conditions actually emerge. ALSA should remain, in the long term, the employer of choice for the Spanish transport industry." In 2017 (subject to the limits of this desktop, arm's-length exercise) it would appear that, gratifyingly, no complacency has been allowed to take hold.

A new communications platform introduced by ALSA now allows employees to have direct communications with managers, including access to a weekly (Friday) email from the CEO. ALSA Campus is a new online training platform which has high levels of support: 300 applicants were recently received from drivers and non-drivers requesting access to the company's English language course, all of which were accepted. This is an imaginative and welcome innovation which stands as a credit to ALSA management and, of course, to the staff whose participation is welcome and encouraging.

North America (Durham School Services)

National Express's business in North America has two areas of activity: student transportation and transit services. It operates in 36 US states and four Canadian provinces. The student transportation business operates through medium-term contracts awarded by local school boards to provide safe and reliable transport for students, and is the second largest private operator in North America. The transit business operates a number of transit and paratransit services across the US.

The company continues to make steady progress across the areas highlighted by last year's report – specifically on wages and the broader issue of industrial relations. It has made particular progress with regard to DriveCam (whose introduction has been broadly welcomed by management and employees), and has embraced positive efforts to improve morale through better recreational facilities, through an increase in community and 'corporate responsibility' activities and more efficient maintenance/replacement systems.

Master Driver

The 2016 review raised concerns that the Master Driver programme, which has proved so successful and popular in the UK, had not yet achieved any real level of awareness in National Express's activities in the USA. It added: "While the company does have a 'Pride in Safety' programme which is designed to reward similar behaviours, having seen the power the Master Driver initiative has had on engagement and morale in other locations I think it is a priority to ensure the North American programme is rolled out more effectively to ensure staff are fully engaged."

Since the start of 2017, however, the Master Driver programme has been piloted in Durham's Transit Division and in 18 School Bus Customer Service Centres (CSCs), with a full, North American-wide implementation planned for 2018. The aim is for the Master Driver programme eventually to replace the current safety award programme.

DriveCam

Some trade unions in the US have adopted a positive approach to the introduction of DriveCam, accepting the argument that its implementation presents more of a protection than a threat to its members. Eugene Collins, business agent for AFSCME, Indianapolis, pointed out that his members and colleagues – drivers and monitors – rely on DriveCam to protect them from spurious allegations whose veracity can be confirmed quickly and accurately by "pulling the tapes" of the alleged incident. He added that DriveCam hasn't been "an issue", except where it might be used "in the wrong context, in a disciplinary hearing", the use of which would be "inappropriate".

There exists a broad recognition among Durham employees that DriveCam is overwhelmingly of benefit to them. But management will have to continue to monitor the situation and make sure that cross-party agreement and protocols (similar to those agreed at Perry Barr in Birmingham, in conjunction with the relevant trade unions) are in place and are adhered to, in order to maintain workers' continued support for the system. Equally, given the positive experience and approach of other unions across the group I encourage North American Unions to ensure constructive engagement.

Master Technician

On the maintenance front, more than 30 technicians now hold Master Technician status from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). In addition, seven National Express (NELLC – the parent company in North America) locations have received the ASE Blue Seal of Excellence, indicating that at least 75% of technicians performing diagnosis and repairs are ASE certified and each area of service offered in the maintenance shop is covered by at least one ASE-certified technician.

Condition/age of equipment

My 2016 review emphasised the need to review processes for the procurement and funding of everyday mechanical repairs, and reported the frustration of workers who feel their jobs are made needlessly difficult by red tape. Therefore Durham's response is to be welcomed: management has shown itself to be responsive to the need to review and update maintenance/replacement processes. But it must continue to show willingness to act on drivers' suggested



improvements.

Remuneration

The previous review also stated: “All workers of whatever grade want to be better paid, but there is a realism among most workers about the competitive nature of the school bus industry in the US. However, Durham should try to address the complaint that drivers of longer tenure do not receive the recognition they believe they deserve.”

In response, Durham stated: “As the US economy has begun to strengthen we continue to work with our customers to ensure we offer competitive pay in the markets we serve. We ended 2016 with a 1.4% improvement in driver turnover.” This is a welcome development (the challenge of a high level of driver turnover was very evident during the research for the 2016 report) and the company should consider strategies to continue this trend so that it can be maintained even in the event of a national economic downturn.

Recreational facilities

An issue of concern to Durham drivers during my initial visits in North America at the beginning of 2016 was the impact on morale of recreation and rest facilities that are badly maintained and equipped. The report stated: “While recognising that CSCs are workplaces and not recreational facilities, management should nevertheless treat workers’ lounge areas with respect and as key sources of either high or low morale. While I saw the results of some recent investments I believe further facilities improvement should be a priority for the company.”

Durham seems to have stepped up to this challenge, with the Worker’s Compensation task force now including as a line item the review and discussion of the facilities. The company said: “Quarterly we obtain fresh feedback from the operations and safety teams to identify the facilities that need the most help. Of course cost is an issue but we did place \$1(million) in the Finance budget (2016 and 2017) to make necessary repairs – four properties were assisted last year with this funding.”

Complaints about seemingly minor issues in ‘rec rooms’ can be the source of disproportionate unhappiness in the workforce, something Durham has realised and acted upon as it said in its response: “Additionally, there is a lot of small improvement work (updated break rooms, lighting, bathrooms, etc.) that is initiated by the HR team while managing an employee relations/labour concern.”

Projects completed in 2016 range geographically across the country, as well as in the categories of complaints addressed: from extra disabled parking spaces in Mount Vernon, Maryland, to the control and removal of vermin in Beach Park, Illinois, and the purchase of new furniture for workers in Albany, New York.

Another successful CSC improvement has been the addition of WiFi in driver break rooms. Currently WiFi is installed at 111 CSCs with plans to roll out the technology to 25 additional sites by the end of the year. This offering has been well received by employees, who can use the WiFi and save their personal data usage (and respective charges) on personal devices while in Durham’s CSC. Use has reportedly been so great at several locations that technology has had to be upgraded to ensure bandwidth was available for all of the employees.

Corporate responsibility

Durham employees were found, in 2016, to take pride in corporate responsibility activities which they felt added value to their jobs as well as to their communities. The previous report recommended the continuation of such events and that employees’ opinions should be sought as to which events in future should be supporter initiated. It was also suggested that great effort should be made to publicise such activities and events.

In response, Durham management communications said it has initiated the use of several channels to share stories of community support. ‘Dashboard’ tablets have now been installed at every CSC in order to highlight stories from around North America. Team members use this tablet to swipe in and out every day, giving them an opportunity to see the content.

Social media is used to share stories with team members who follow Durham’s accounts. And the company intranet (team member portal) has been redesigned to allow better sharing of community involvement stories. This portal is also a source for company news and initiatives.

A response feature has also been added to stories so team members can share suggestions and best practices on community involvement. The first-ever digital version of Durham’s North American employee newsletter has also been produced, giving team members media-rich content. And Durham launched its 100-year celebration intranet portal to allow team members to share and view personal photos and stories of their highlights working for the company.

Within the communities served by Durham (i.e. beyond the employees’ base), social media is used regularly to reach external stakeholders about Durham’s community involvement. The company also hosts tours for elected officials at CSCs to provide insight on Durham’s commitment to safety and to explain how its operations work.

The practice of sending official press releases, accompanied by photographs, to local news agencies in order to publicise local news (such as certifications, awards and elected official visits) continues.

It should be noted that many of the improvements and innovations listed in the categories above have made a significant contribution to the 2016 review’s recommendation for a significant improvement in internal communications.



Maintenance challenges

A regular and strongly-held complaint from drivers, engineers and administration workers during my 2016 review was in relation to the system of ordering spare parts for vehicles. It said: “some drivers’ perceptions remain that the situation is not being improved. While a detailed assessment of this no doubt complex issue is outside the scope of this review, a review into whether the best system is in place could potentially – through even a relatively modest change in practice – result in a disproportionately large ‘win’ for the company in terms of morale and workers’ relations.”

In response, Durham states that requests and approvals for maintenance parts ordering were improved throughout 2016: “During the year the maintenance organisation was realigned to allow local maintenance teams to begin reporting through the maintenance organisation instead of the operations group, referred to internally as M2M. The M2M roll-out began in January [the month of my visits] and was completed by September 2016. This meant that purchase approval no longer required [general manager] sign-off, thus removing a step from the chain.”

Durham should be recognised for acting on this important issue; it will be important in future to estimate the degree of workers’ awareness of this change and their view on its effectiveness.

A major overhaul of medium-range capital expenditure requisitions has been undertaken, so that more of the regular repair and maintenance jobs can be progressed with significantly less delay. The cost levels at which requests by technicians, salaried shop supervisors and Regional Maintenance Managers (RMMs) need to seek approval have all been increased. The cap for RMMs is being considered for a further significant increase.

These changes will be welcomed by CRC staff, and management should maintain flexibility in considering further such changes where necessary.

Local management

The quality of local management personnel was highlighted by the 2016 review as being crucial to the morale and efficiency of CSCs and the service they provide to their customers. My report said: “Poor local management can quickly undermine years of hard work fostering a positive workplace environment. In a company such as the North American business where more than 200 locations are spread across a continent, this is even more important. National Express should therefore review its approach to supporting, developing and challenging local managers across the business.”

Durham responded: “To upskill our current and future NELLC leaders, many actions have been, or continue to be, taken. On the talent development side, NELLC implemented a General Manager (GM) ‘Onboarding’ process. Since July 2016, 44 new GMs began their roles using the GM Onboarding process.”

‘Onboarding’ involves the use of eLearning modules to augment the GMs’ development, which comes primarily through on-the-job experiences and exposure to peers and colleagues. Periodic updates on progress are provided to their respective Regional Managers, and feedback from the GMs themselves indicate that the new process has better equipped them for their new roles.

Included in the Onboarding process is a face-to-face session called CORE (Culture – Organization – Results – Excellence). During this session, participants have an opportunity to interact with subject matter experts and build upon what they are learning through the GM Onboarding process and activities. End-of-programme feedback from participants has been favourable and GMs have provided anecdotal evidence that skills and knowledge gleaned from CORE have been found to be useful in, and relevant to, their everyday work environments.

Durham added: “In addition, all GMs are encouraged to participate in supplemental eLearning modules covering a variety of leadership topics. These modules include internally developed courses as well as a course library obtained from a third-party vendor, Development Dimensions International (DDI).”

Since the beginning of 2016, 21% of Durham’s GMs have been replaced, and the opportunity has been taken, says Durham, to bring in more higher-performing talent, often at a higher cost.

UK Bus

National Express is the market leader in the UK's largest urban bus market outside of London. Services are operated from nine garages across the West Midlands. The company also runs urban bus services in the cities of Coventry and Dundee. In addition, it operates the Midland Metro light rail service between Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

There continues to be a pride associated with being part of National Express's bus passenger services, and managers are fostering and strengthening the relations with workers and trade unions that already exist. The introduction of DriveCam has been handled sensitively and positively, with any early reservations being overcome. The success of the Master Driver and Master Technician programmes continues to be seen as valuable and prestigious. The 2016 review made a number of recommendations regarding staff communications: "While there have been recent innovations in this area – including giving all staff an email account – the full benefits are yet to be realised. Therefore the company should review what more can be done, working with front line employees to deliver improvements in communications."

There seems to have been a welcome increase in the amount of communications between management and staff. More to the point, unlike much corporate communications in other industries, the 'Bus Business Brief' reports – sent by email each week from the Managing Director] – are well written, concise and interesting. They contain items of importance to the company more widely, as well as more local, human interest items such as impending retirements and staff awards.



From discussions with the main trade union covering the Perry Barr operations, there seem to be no impending causes for concern as far as industrial relations are concerned. There exist perennial concerns about the nature and structure of the bus industry in the UK and the consequences on the stability of the industry as a result of the notable decline in bus passenger numbers caused by increasing car ownership. Management should be aware of the desire by trade unions for a more efficient and transparent exchange of information regarding planned changes in services. This is a potential weak point in the relationship between management and unions and one that could be positively addressed with a minimum of effort.

The Master Driver initiative continues to be unconditionally approved by workers and trade unions, and is seen as a major achievement by individual drivers. Any reservations that might have been held at the start of the programme have been overcome during its successful roll-out. Drivers retain a high sense of pride in the achievement of being named a Master Driver, and National Express should be congratulated for its continuing support of the initiative.

Implementation of DriveCam has been warmly welcomed by the union and its members. In fact, drivers without the system fitted are eagerly anticipating its application to their own vehicles, believing it offers a significant increase in protection from abuse by passengers and against assault. The union is proud of the role it played, along with management, in developing a protocol for the use of DriveCam.

Again, National Express can be proud of the positive relationship it has maintained with its trade unions, since this led directly to the efficient introduction of a system that might otherwise have been the source of resentment and suspicion by drivers. It has instead turned out to be a benefit to drivers, passengers and the company.

UK Coach

National Express is the largest operator of scheduled coach services in the UK. The business operates high-frequency services linking more than 900 destinations across the country. It is the UK partner in the Eurolines network, which serves 450 destinations across Europe. The Kings Ferry and Clarkes of London are also part of the UK Coach business and are both long-established providers of private hire and commuter coach travel services in London and the south of England.

A step change in efficiency and method of communication has impacted positively on the workforce at UK Coach in the last year. An increase in the response rate and in positive answers to the annual employee survey indicates that management is making broadly the right judgements.

Last year's report was compiled following a visit to National Express's Sipson Road depot near Heathrow Airport.

In 2016, the review recommended improved communication between drivers and management. It added: "Drivers do not have their own email account or portal; this could become part of the daily routine and help improve communication. I believe UK Bus has recently introduced something similar and therefore provides an opportunity for cross-business learning."

National Express's coach operations have, in response, introduced a number of developments to improve communications with drivers.

Strategy is communicated via regular conferences with managers who then brief their teams. 2016 also saw further communication of National Express's strategy via a short animated video distributed throughout the workforce by email (and still available on the intranet) and supplementary posters sent to all sites. Company news and updates are communicated via a range of e-newsletters and a company magazine called Upfront.

At a local level a number of business areas, including coach depots, set up Google Community pages for employees to log on to, which provides them with business updates, recognition and celebration of local events (for example, long service award presentation, charity events, driver forum notifications, engagement initiatives, etc). Drivers have also added content which helps them share local knowledge about routes they drive and things to look out for.

'Owned Operations' depots now have driver forums to enable them to discuss issues affecting them and to receive a business/depot update. In addition to this, as part of the World Class Driver programme, the workstreams have access to a separate panel of drivers who comment on initiatives, and provide ideas and feedback to workstreams on their proposals before they are progressed.

A monthly 'core brief' conference call was introduced in 2016 to provide a business update on key Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), performance and progress of a business area. This information is then cascaded to all managers who deliver it to their teams.

The 2016 employee survey (of Owned Operations employees only) saw a significant increase in the number of participants in the employee survey who agreed with the statement, "I understand the long-term aims of the business" – up from 76% to 85%. The question, "Is Coach good at communicating what is happening in the company?" (included in the survey for the first time) scored a positive response of 66%.

The summary score of UK Coach in the survey was 774 (out of a possible 1,000) against the previous year's score of 732 – a significant indication of progress, showing driver engagement has improved from 685 in 2015 to 722 in 2016. The scores for Sipson Road were also significantly improved – from 706 in 2015 to 717 in 2016. National Express believes this progress has been underpinned by strong and improved communications – a reasonable conclusion to draw, given the simultaneous and significant improvement in internal communications.

Further improvements to communications with drivers are planned in 2017 with the development of an employee portal and a real time database to allow each driver to view their own performance data.

However, there seems to have been no progress made towards allocating drivers with their own email accounts. National Express needs either to explain why this is not its preferred option or to explain fully what the implementation timetable for this innovation will be.



UK Coach operations have made efforts to improve significantly the company's (already positive) relations with the relevant trade unions.

During 2017 a focus for the unions has been ensuring its representatives had opportunities for personal development. The company has worked in partnership with the union to ensure that they are able to attend personal development courses, including union conferences.

Instant drug testing is currently being trialed within Owned Operations and was welcomed by the union. As a result the company is now scoping the opportunity for this initiative to be launched across all Owned Operations as part of pre-recruitment and random testing.

National Express is reviewing, in conjunction with the union, how to improve the transparency of payslips and the wider remuneration process. A number of union representatives have had a tour of Bordesley with the UK Coach Human Resources Director.

Concerns by Unite about the rise in inflation/cost of living for staff led directly to the launch of Neyber, in partnership with National Express management. During the pay talks the company was able to launch a "salary sacrifice" loan system in partnership with Neyber which enables staff to receive loans at interest rates no higher than 9%. As an indirect result, individuals have more disposable income and are able to manage their debt and income more efficiently.

For the majority of drivers at UK Coach, DriveCam has been well received. Most drivers view it as an opportunity to learn lessons and to be recognised for high standards of professional driving. Concerns of the trade unions about data protection issues continue to be discussed by both unions and management, and a positive outcome is expected.

Analysis of group-wide initiatives

Master Driver

The Master Driver programme is a group-wide National Express initiative that both recognises and further develops the skills and potential of all of its drivers.

Everyone who joins the business will start as a Professional Driver with the potential to progress to become either an Advanced Driver or Master Driver. Drivers gaining these additional qualifications will have the opportunity to wear a special tie, badge and hi-vis jacket to help others recognise their personal achievements.

Advanced and Master Drivers will have an excellent safety record, excellent driving skills and be a champion for customer service.

Advanced Driver status is achieved after two consecutive years of excellent service with no preventable accidents (whether to vehicles, people or property), no valid speeding convictions and no proven customer complaints, with the participant driver working towards or completing PCV the Driving NVQ.

A Master Driver will need to have achieved the same qualifications as an Advanced Driver but with three consecutive years of excellent service and performance assessments. They will also need to achieve an IAM RoadSmart (IAM) driving and hand accreditation a customer service qualification, RoadSmart and will need to undertake a driver risk analysis.

In the UK, Master Drivers will gain membership of the IAM, which brings many personal benefits including discounted breakdown cover, potential reductions on car, motorcycle and home insurance, and savings on many other lifestyle purchases.

All drivers who achieve Advanced or Master Driver status are invited, along with their family, to attend an awards event where they are presented with a framed certificate, badge, tie and hi-vis jacket.

National Express also pays the annual IAM membership fee for all those drivers who qualify.

The Master Driver initiative is one that is welcomed in every part of the National Express family where it has been rolled out. It offers high-quality training and prestige, giving both the company and its employees a real advantage in the market place. It improves morale of drivers – and their families and friends – and is an initiative of which National Express can be proud even as it benefits from it.

Alan (Casey) McNeil, chairman of local Unite branch, Perry Bar said: “I was critical [of Master Driver] to begin with. I believed the money would be better spent bringing lower-standard drivers up to the standard of the rest of the drivers. Drivers are very positive now that their good driving is being recognised. I was sceptical to begin with [but] seeing the way people have embraced it has changed my mind on that.”

DriveCam

In National Express's Annual Report and Accounts 2016, Group Chief Executive Dean Finch wrote of one of the most important safety innovations in recent years: “technology is being used to help us improve our safety performance. Lytx DriveCam in particular is proving an invaluable tool to help improve driving performance and reduce the cost of accidents. The leading technology of its type on the market, its power lies both in the data analytics it generates and the videos it allows to be reviewed. It is therefore an important management tool that allows tailored and targeted training. It also provides evidence to deal with any claims made against our drivers in an accident. We have fully installed the technology within UK Coach last year (with the recently acquired Clarkes vehicles to be fitted this year), and have begun its roll-out across UK Bus, ALSA and North America. As well as proving popular with staff, the emerging evidence demonstrates that it is a cost saving measure with UK Coach's pilot in one of our depots showing a 10% reduction in collision rate and annualised insurance costs coming down around 30%. Our early North American pilots have also demonstrated similar results.”

Interviews conducted for this review suggest that across management, employees and – crucially – trade unions, DriveCam has been broadly welcomed (though not in every case without qualification).

- Alan (Casey) McNeil, chairman of local Unite branch, Perry Barr, commented: “I haven't had any [union member] coming in and saying anything bad about [DriveCam]. The company and the union did a lot of work to try to stop the negativity towards it. Drivers were [initially] saying it was a spy in the cab. But we explained that if you drove smoothly and safely, it wouldn't even switch on. Then, when a passenger gets on and calls you all the Fs in the world, you press a little button and you've got proof [of the abuse]. A lot of the drivers do use it with manual switch [to protect against] abusive passengers.”
- Diego Buenestado of the UGT transport union welcomed the prospect of the introduction of the DriveCam programme at ALSA, on the strict condition that the system is used exclusively to offer protection to drivers and customers (from assault, etc). He reflected reservations among the wider workforce that the system could be – but should not be – used to “limit the freedom of the drivers”.
- In North America, Eugene Collins, business agent for AFSCME, Indianapolis, pointed out that his members and colleagues – drivers and monitors – rely on DriveCam to protect them from spurious allegations whose veracity can be confirmed quickly and accurately by “pulling the tapes” of the alleged incident.

Such broad positive feeling towards DriveCam is to the company's credit; it should endeavour to make sure DriveCam, its introduction and its effectiveness, does not become a proxy in any future industrial disputes over seemingly unrelated issues. The progress that has been made so far – clearly working closely with trade unions – must not be surrendered or compromised in attempts to assuage workers' representatives in future industrial disputes.

World Class Maintenance

As part of his '2020 Vision' for the company, Dean Finch, National Express Group Chief Executive, outlined his ambition to enshrine Master Driver and Master Technician status as integral pillars of the company's reputation for World Class Maintenance.

The stated (and practical) aim of both standards is to make working at National Express a badge of honour and excellence that serves the company well as well as encouraging pride and personal development within the workforce.

As part of the World Class Maintenance programme, National Express's North American locations have embarked on the prestigious ASE certification, where at least 75% of the company's technicians performing diagnosis and repairs must be ASE-certified. Each area of service offered in the maintenance shop must be covered by at least one ASE-certified technician.

A total of six 'shops' have so far been awarded ASE certification; the goal is to have at least 20 shops certified by the end of 2017.

National Express's North American subsidiary, NELLC, reimburses the costs to employees of tests passed successfully, along with a cash bonus (\$50 or \$100).

Further, the ASE Master Certified Technician annual bonus programme, offering a payout of \$2k to successful applicants, was rolled out in 2016. Already in 2017, Master Technician bonuses have been disbursed to 25 technicians in 2017, on top of the 15 in 2016.

There are currently 32 ASE Master Certified Technicians on NELLC staff: 28 in the company's School Bus operations, and four in Transit operations. The company-wide goal is to increase this figure to 40 by the end of 2017.

The Master Technician framework has now been designed. As a result a Partner Operator has taken our framework and implemented it within their business resulting in it attracting two engineers. Within National Express Coach, all technicians have now been assessed and as a result a training plan for each individual has been created. A presentation and consultation to all technicians to inform them of the new changes began in April 2017.

Measuring the 'People' value

Graeme Cohen of VaLUENTI^S, which is responsible for employee surveys, has concluded that overall, in the geographical locations in which National Express operates, the trend in employee satisfaction is generally upwards: "All divisions have their own context; however, on balance, the overall trend is for increasingly positive scores – particularly relating to certain aspects of leadership approaches within the business."

One area Graeme mentions as a potential source of complacency is around increasing scores and on the importance of keeping a focus on "high-quality employee engagement as a key input to performance and customer satisfaction". This closely reflects one of the central conclusions I drew in my 2016 review report.

The broad conclusions VaLUENTI^S drew from its survey results throughout National Express's worldwide activities included:

North America: All directly comparable questions (in the survey) have increased by an average of 2 percentage points, with the largest increases relating to information provision, involvement and perception of integrity;

UK Bus: 34 questions have increased by any extent, by an average of 4 percentage points, with a wide range of gains – performance and feedback emerges in particular as an enhanced theme;

UK Coach: All but one of the questions have increased by some extent, and perceptions of aspects of leadership have generally increased (including sense of corporate direction, recognition, involvement and integrity); and

ALSA (Spain and Morocco): While the headline figures recorded for ALSA employees were consistently lower than those recorded elsewhere in the group, the upwards trajectory (in comparison with previous surveys) has been unambiguous. ALSA recorded the highest group-wide response to the question, "Do you wish to be working here in five years' time?"

Conclusion

While managers throughout National Express's global activities are aware of the dangers of complacency, it is undeniable that they have achieved – and continue to achieve – significant improvements in staff morale and commitment to the company. There is little doubt that this has been due to the willingness of managers at all levels to consider sensible changes to existing practices and to value the input from workers at the coal face.

While no one can reasonably expect plain sailing at all times – and the economic climate remains a source of concern – National Express is revealed in this review exercise as particularly equipped to cope with medium and long-term challenges, thanks largely to the partnership it has purposefully developed with its workforce.

About the author

Tom Harris is director of Third Avenue Communications, an independent consultancy specialising in political lobbying and strategy. A lifelong trade unionist and former workplace representative, Tom was a Labour MP until last year and a transport minister under the previous Labour Government. He is now working as a journalist and columnist.



