

Glitches in the Computerised Future of the MOT

In light of the recent 'Which?' report criticising the quality of MOT testing the emphasis has once again been drawn to what the industry and government can do to improve standards. Computerisation appears to be the government's answer to improving the quality of the MOT test, but what will this mean for those at the sharp end of MOT testing?

Industry members are becoming increasingly concerned by the imminent arrival of MOT computerisation. However, government association representatives have contradicted these uncertainties by claiming that historically this was not the view of the trade. The Vehicle Operating Service Agency maintains that computerisation was introduced in accordance with the trade's past response that it was the answer to improving the standards of the MOT test. Whichever side of the argument you are on one thing is certain – MOT computerisation is underway and will set the standard for future changes to build upon.

VOSA has been condemned for continuously delaying the delivery of the computerised system, and this in itself is increasing concerns about the system's impact on businesses. The official line is that testing of the computerised system has been delayed by "slippage in SBS software." VOSA spokesperson Miranda Roberts explained: "We have completed trial stage one of the introduction process and are currently installing the equipment into five test stations and 38 MOT garages. We will then begin a wider roll out involving more stations before the system goes live before the end of the year." The agency predicts the roll out will take about six months to complete. The agency openly admits that some garages are experiencing problems with the software, and so VOSA is trying to make sure the equipment "fulfils all the requirements and is as effective as possible."

When the system is cleared of all its glitches all 19,000 MOT testing stations will be provided with PCs, monitors and printers, and gas analysers will be fitted with a smart card reader. The equipment will be connected to a central database of vehicle information, test results and details of authorised examiners and testers. Access to the system is designed for authorised users only, via electronic smart cards and a password, however anyone with any computer experience knows how hard this method of security is to maintain in a hectic and pressurised work place.

The majority of mechanics disapprove of computerisation because of the cost and the fact that it has been forced on them, but more simply because it means change. Upgrading

equipment will be a cost they didn't budget for, although installation of the equipment is free, the consequences such as updating equipment are not.

A minority of garages, like Autoplus of Nottingham, are all for computerisation. Mr Edwards, MD, Autoplus believes it can only aid business by streamlining the process so that all the data needed to provide an MOT test is found in one place. To those garages that are dragging their heels, Autoplus says 'move with the times' and warns that other European countries accept change on a daily basis and that is why they are at the forefront of some of the most important innovations.

"I'm confident that the longer it takes VOSA to test the system the more likely it is that they've got it right. Realistically these things do take a long time to be developed from the initial concept to the finished product. VOSA is obviously undertaking thorough testing of the system and it's good that they will not be relying on individual businesses to test it for them as there isn't enough computer expertise in the MOT trade to be able to effectively deal with any problems encountered," added Mr Edwards.

Although he is confident it will improve his business, Mr Edward's is not so certain about the effect it will have on improving standards. He commented: "Reducing fraud and improving MOT testing is as much down to the inspectorate as it is to the garage, more spot checks are an important factor in improving the standards of testing."

Whilst the MOT testers and head industry representatives may not agree on the issue of computerisation, most agree that standards do need to be improved. Test standards need to be more effectively monitored, the quality of MOT documents needs to be improved and information for the testing stations needs to be more accurate and up-to-date. On top of this theft and fraud associated with MOT certificates is a growing concern. VOSA wants to see tighter control of certificates, closer monitoring and a reduction in the dependence on

paper certificates. When the system comes into operation MOT certificates currently in use will be destroyed and replaced with new style certificates, failure notices, advisory notices and checklists.

As with every business the consumers' rights have to be catered to, but consumer protection and confidence in the MOT test still has a way to go to rid it and its associated parties of the existing negative image. The AA explains that up until now the Department for Transport's Vehicle Inspectorate, overseeing the licensing of garages has had to rely on motorists' feedback of their MOT test experiences, and on 'on-the-spot' checks to determine the quality and honesty of the licensed MOT test garages. By ensuring more consistent standards and enabling the public



to check if a vehicle has passed or failed an MOT, and thus making it easier to detect fraud, the new system will go a long way to convince consumers that MOT testing is as sound as it should be.

Achieving measurable improvements in consumer confidence for the test must be the single overriding short-term objective during the computerisation of the MOT test. But there are other longer-term benefits for motorists. According to the AA: "With the MOT status and history of the car verifiable on-line, and linked to the DVLA and motor insurance databases, it would be possible for the car to be taxed on-line, rather than the owner having to queue at the Post Office."

Although computerisation should be able to offer more sophisticated monitoring by detecting any deviations from the norm and identifying particular garages that are not up

to standard there is still a further need of the government to acknowledge the importance of spot checks and 'mystery shopping,' as well as the importance of thorough follow up.

Not surprisingly equipment manufacturers are on the government's side and believe that there is much room for technological improvement with regards to MOT tests. The belief that test stations have failed to invest properly in recent years is a view shared by most in the manufacturing chain. Philip Hodges, UK managing director of Beissbarth adds: "There is a lot of MOT testing equipment out there that is going to fail miserably over the next few years. It's no good trying to do an MOT and the work around it with equipment that is 20 years old or was designed so mechanics could work on Morris Minors. Brake testers for example today should be capable of down loading information to a support computer. Test centres need to step into the 21st century. Testing equipment should be able to be calibrated remotely."

Again the focus is on the business' ability to offer a higher degree of professionalism. "Too many test centres are just not thinking about the consumer and it's the consumer that will choose. Remember that the MOT on average creates work for the garage worth £118, so it is business worth investing in. This is about acting like a business rather than just a fixer," continued Mr Hodges.

As far as VOSA is concerned it claims there are no other immediate plans to change the MOT and explain that it is down to the Department of Transport to legislate any more changes. However, that does not appear to be the end of it. The European Union is also scrutinising practices, and is looking at one man testing through the eyes of today's health and safety concerns (see page). In light of this the future looks bleak for the way in which tests are currently carried out.

But on a more positive side (for equipment manufacturers at least) the prospects for MOT test lanes, with equipment capable of carrying out the tests as a one man operation, are extremely good. Although there are many garages that are reluctant to accept change most accept that test lanes are going to arrive sooner rather than later.

The industry's reaction to test lanes is, as always one of mixed opinion. With the increasing popularity of test lanes comes the issue of further investment in MOT work, something the majority of garages are keen to avoid. Test lanes have already been introduced in Ireland, where they are becoming increasingly popular, a promising model for the UK market.

As far as Mr Hodges and Beissbarth are concerned MOT test lanes are the future: "A lot of companies which haven't invested will lose out because they won't be able to offer the best service and consumers always demand the best. Garages are reluctant to look at what they can earn from investing in new equipment and are stuck on how much the initial outlay costs." Beissbarth introduced its test lanes into the market six weeks ago and has already sold a handful of products.

Whilst test lanes offer distinct advantages in terms of standards of equipment they will be an inconceivable option for many service providers, due to the sheer size of the equipment. Because of this they are likely to be introduced as a permitted option rather than made mandatory, nevertheless many trade members see them as a threat to the future of their business. This, and the emphasis in the market on buying the cheapest equipment available go hand in hand in holding back MOT development within the ranks – where it is needed most.

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