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Why a professional register is win-win for the motor trade

By Professor Jim Saker

Some years ago, we were asked to research the topic of professional registers and the need for regulation of occupations. The aim was to gain an understanding of why certain professions had developed a registration system and the impact this had on job roles and their standing in society. This may sound a little academic, and you may require a stimulant or two should you care to read further, but the research raised some issues relevant to our sector.

The idea of professional registration came about for four basic reasons:

The need for standardisation
The historic rise in professional registers in the UK dates to the 1930s and was driven by desire for standardisation of measures. For a medieval economy to grow, commerce needed to have standard units in which to trade. This gave an element of trust in the market mechanism. The need for transparency and understanding gave rise to many of the 182 livery companies of the City of London.

If you look at a number of our aftersales operations from a customer's perspective, many are incomprehensible. This confusion and uncertainty is compounded by the fact that the customer has no idea of the status or qualifications of the person working on their vehicle.

Without a transparent registrar that determines the right to practise, there is no perceived uniform standard of performance. Will one dealer offer the same level of performance as another? Will a small dealership have the same level of trained personnel as a large one? Will a multi-franchise dealership have manufacturer specialists?

The need for safeguard
Most of us would be alarmed if, as we were rolled down to the operating theatre, we discovered that the surgeon who was about to operate had been struck off by the General Medical Council for incompetence. We rely on a number of key registers of occupations to keep us safe.

The bodies that maintain these registers set the professional standards that are expected, including education and fitness to practise.

For years, we have been striving to improve the efficiency and professionalism of our staff. Surely one of the major benefits of having a comprehensive registration process would be the ability to weed out the poor performers who bring our sector into disrepute.

Perhaps the only downside is that it gives registered technicians greater bargaining power in the labour market, however the expectation would be that increased professionalism should benefit both employer and employee.

The need for status
The concept of registration also raises the status of an occupation. By having a register of those who can practise by its very nature the register also has the power to exclude.

The process of having this level of discretion gives an occupation a status as it is not open to all. You have to qualify to join the profession usually by taking some educational programme and having passed some form of examination whether in a classroom or on the job.

For years, our sector has been complaining about the difficulty we have in recruiting good quality people. With some justification there is a need to raise the status of what the sector does. It is an increasingly sophisticated profession, not simply on the technical side, but also in the changing way in which our market operates. This requires people with knowledge and a skill-set that are capable of building resilient and robust organisations.

The need for support
One of the most interesting aspects is the way in which most of the institutes and professional bodies provide support for their members. By being part of a register you are able to access a range of support services both centrally but also through meeting with groups of peers.

Registration creates a cohort of people who have common requirements but also a coherence that allows the industry to develop best practise and go forward together. With potential changes likely to take place in areas such as powertrain over the next 10 years there will be a need to develop a strategy for training in the industry as a whole, not the historic piecemeal approach of developing each franchise separately.

From a customer's perspective, there doesn't seem to be a downside of a professional register. There also seem to be major benefits for employees. The problem lies with whether employers would see this as in some way limiting the pool of people available and therefore restricting their growth ambitions. In the short term, this may be the case, but in the longer run our sector would end up attracting better people operating more efficiently, generating better profits and giving confidence and status to our sector. I'd register my support for that.

Professor Jim Saker is director of the Centre for Automotive Management at Loughborough University's Business School and an AM Awards Judge. He has been involved in the automotive industry for more than 20 years.