

The importance of experience

Despite the skills and expertise required for servicing, maintaining and repairing a compressed air system, an engineer doesn't need any specific qualifications or certificates to carry out these tasks - meaning that anyone owning a compressor can't be sure if their machine is being looked after by someone who actually knows how to do so correctly and competently.

PWE spoke to Mattei's Robin Townsend about why it is important to choose an experienced and competent engineer.

While some compressors are designed to last for years, during the course of their working life they will need to be maintained and serviced - and this is a legal requirement in accordance with the Pressure Systems Safety Regulations 2000, which clearly identifies the need for maintenance in regulation 12 'Maintenance', and the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998 in regulation five 'Maintenance'. Mattei's Robin Townsend highlights that service schedules differ between compressors, "and even those requiring minimal maintenance - such as Mattei's rotary vane compressors which can easily run for 100,000 hours without wear - will still need to be checked on a regular basis".

General wear and tear means some key parts, including the air filter, the air/oil separator, the oil filter and various seals will be part of the scheduled maintenance requirements. In screw type compressors, hoses, belts and, most significantly in terms of cost, air end bearings, will also need to be included in the schedule.

The oil quality with all rotary compressors is crucial and will also need to be changed regularly; using good quality, clean oil and clean filters has a direct, positive impact on the energy consumed. The life of oil decreases dramatically with operating temperatures that are too high - therefore keeping the oil cooler clean is essential, and should form part of a routine maintenance schedule according



Mattei's
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to the operating conditions. The Pressure Systems Safety Regulations, regulation seven, calls for the setting of safe operating

limits; pressure is an obvious limit but temperature is often forgotten until it's too late.

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Townsend explains: "If a compressor isn't adequately

serviced and maintained, it will not work to optimum performance or efficiency. Everyday wear means clearances can open up and outputs can drop - with the compressor then working harder to actually produce a lower output. Increased pressure drops can reduce a compressor's energy

efficiency quite significantly, meaning much higher energy bills than necessary.

"And even if a compressor is working well, it's advisable to have the whole compressed air system checked for leaks, especially as air escaping through a single 3mm hole could cost a business nearly £700 per year in energy costs, according to the Carbon Trust. Repairing air leaks will offer the added benefit of helping to reduce the maintenance requirements due to a lesser load on the compressor."

So, when the time comes to undertake a compressor service, what should a business owner look for from a compressor company or engineer? Townsend says this is a problematic question, since there are no relevant qualifications or certificates for engineers working on compressed air systems - despite the fact compressors are sophisticated, highly engineered pieces of machinery:

"Unfortunately, the compressed air industry is not, for example, like the gas industry, where anyone working with gas appliances legally has to be registered - formerly with CORGI but now with the Gas Safe Register."

So with no clear guidance in terms of an engineer's competence what should you be looking for? Townsend comments that Mattei for example recommends business owners use BCAS' Trusted Trader scheme at www.referenceline.com/bcas, which provides unbiased, up-to-date, genuine recommendations -



helping business owners to make informed choices about the engineers that service their compressors.

But before committing to a service, a business owner should make enquiries about what is covered, what is guaranteed, how long the service will take and whether the quote provided is what will actually be charged. Compressor service quotes vary quite considerably, so it's really important to understand what's

included. The engineer should also be asked about what type and size of compressor they have experience with.

A properly trained, experienced compressor engineer will use genuine parts and genuine oil - and this should be also checked beforehand. Non-genuine spares or oil frequently fail to match the performance of the original, and the consequences might not be

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realised until it is too late. Non-genuine parts and oil can lead to poor performance, reliability issues, serious damage and breakdowns, and can invalidate a warranty - hence costing a business more money in the long run.

Compressors are highly engineered, and therefore the

servicing and maintenance of this type of machine requires specialist skills. With no official or legal competency scheme in existence, business owners would be wise to use BCAS' Trusted Trade scheme, which can be used to find companies and engineers that are competent, experienced and recommended by other businesses.

■ For further information please visit: www.mattei.co.uk

As well as being part of the Trusted Trader and the Safe Contractor Approval schemes, Mattei has put some very stringent standards in place for its own engineers, and they work to clear and comprehensive check lists. Its engineers all work full time, and are directly employed by the company, meaning it is responsible for their training and performance standards. The company recommends the use of genuine parts, and its hourly rates are fixed, with no hidden fees such as travel costs. It also offers a six month parts and labour warranty.

Mattei is an advocate for the Trusted Trader scheme (with our Trusted Trader recommendation level currently standing at 96 per cent), and was involved in its pilot scheme. We also support BCAS in its aim to put official industry standards in place. From July 2009 it is mandatory for BCAS members to be part of the Trusted Traders scheme.