



*Look closely: Olaf Hingst is the first internally trained auditor for technical assessments at VERS.*

## Technical assessments at VERS

### Workshops under the magnifying glass

The 23 auditors of the VPI service company VERS ensure that wagon keepers have access to a Europe-wide network of technically certified workshops. Olaf Hingst has been part of this team since summer 2022. As the first internally trained auditor, the lateral career changer and his colleagues check whether the services and standards of workshops meet the specifications of the VPI European Maintenance Guide (VPI-EMG).

‘I was sweating a lot’, Olaf Hingst recalls of his first appointment as a newly qualified auditor for technical assessments. Not as much because of the technical challenges, but because of the temperatures in Hungary that day: 40 degrees with bright sunshine.

The certification of the Kaminiski workshop in Debrecen in collaboration with lead auditor Martin Stein went according to plan and checklist.

Olaf Hingst has been on the road as an auditor for VPI European Rail Service GmbH (VERS) for a good six months – not only in Germany, but all over Europe. The career changer endured two years of intensive qualification, during which he familiarised himself with the world of wagon maintenance with a training programme at VERS.

‘I’ve always had a passion for everything that rolls, says the trained motor mechanic and automobile technician. After three decades in the automotive industry, the Escheburg native thought it was time to take on new challenges. ‘I was

looking for a job that had a future’, Hingst explains. ‘Railway freight traffic was my first choice, also with regard to climate protection.’

### Workshop audits in 20 European countries

Hingst is now part of the crew of 23 VERS auditors that assesses workshops in 20 European countries. Their technical assessments are an important building block for the maintenance and quality management of Entities in Charge of Maintenance (ECM) – a task that wagon keepers usually take on themselves.

This was not always the case. It was not until the privatisation of Deutsche Bahn in 2006/2007 that the so-called setting regime ended and with

it the responsibility of the former national railway for the safety and repair of wagons they set in their trains.

What is now considered to be everyday routine in the industry was an enormous challenge back then. The private wagon keepers had to set up their own maintenance management from scratch. They assembled under the umbrella of their association, the Verband der Güterwagenhalter in Deutschland (VPI – Association of Wagon Keepers in Germany), to jointly elaborate recommendations that would allow each ECM to organise its own maintenance. In the meantime, the resulting VPI EMG has become the standard throughout Europe.

Wagon keepers expect workshops to be able to implement the maintenance recommendations formulated in it in a professional manner. 'This is where we come in', says Hingst, explaining the role of the technical assessment auditors. He and his colleagues check whether a workshop meets all the requirements to carry out a wagon overhaul according to VPI EMG recommendations. Are the tools in order? Is the workshop suitably equipped to provide the services offered in a professional manner? Are its employees qualified and do they receive regular training?

Depending on the size of the workshop, Hingst and his colleagues spend one to three days on site going through their checklists for the main audit. Once approval has been granted, they perform smaller

interim audits in the subsequent years and another major audit after five years.

### **Technical assessments are in high demand**

The VERS team of auditors is operating internationally. More than 200 workshops throughout Europe have already passed an audit – from Sweden to Italy and from Turkey to Slovenia. For a maintenance workshop, passing an audit is a coveted proof of quality. Accordingly, the demand for technical assessments is persistently high. The 23 auditors are more than busy: last year alone, they conducted 140 audits.

Until now, the team consisted mainly of volunteers who were approved by the companies in the sector for this task. But the willingness and possibilities of the companies to employ staff for these tasks are dwindling. At the same time, experienced auditors will leave the team in the coming years due to old age. VERS has therefore decided to pursue new avenues. It now trains auditors itself and employs them permanently.

Olaf Hingst is the first internally trained auditor at VERS. Four other engineers are currently undergoing qualification: Ji Jin, Abdelali Wadeh, Marvin Lensch and Ben Krause. They are currently passing through various VERS stations at wagon keepers and workshops of the association in order to gain practical experience in the industry. At the same time, they are acquiring additional qualifications such as safety expert or welding engineer.

With 20 deployment countries, language skills are particularly important for local communication. Consequently, VERS attaches great importance to developing an auditor team with a strong international background. In the future, VERS will be able to call on a team that can carry out assessments in English as well as in French, Swedish, Italian or Dutch and a few other languages.

### **Safety for rolling stock**

Olaf Hingst is still the secondary person in the team when he accepts audits. He finds the intensive and thorough training he has received important. He appreciates the fact that he was given enough time to familiarise himself with the special features of wagon maintenance. 'After all, our work is about the safety of the rolling stock', he emphasises.

As an automobile technician, Hingst was well versed with many topics. Nevertheless, there were technical particularities that he first had to learn at the various stages of his qualification.

'It was great how openly I was received as a career changer in the railway industry', says Hingst after an apprenticeship of two years with five stations. The fact that his colleagues at Nordic Rail Service let him ride on the locomotive was the fulfilment of a childhood dream for him. Next year, Olaf Hingst will finally also be in the driver's seat for audits and will put his first workshop under the magnifying glass as lead auditor.



*On the job in Debrecen: Olaf Hingst checks the paint thickness of reworked wheelsets.*