

# Rail Plant Association Update

RPA Acting-Chairperson Paul Helks reports on the current initiatives of the association for road/rail plant owners.

As promised in the last article, the RPA is now able to update you all on the appointment of the RPA Consultant. It gives me great pleasure to inform you that Steve Featherstone, formerly of Network Rail, has accepted the challenge. Steve, who many of you will know, brings a vast amount of experience and a wealth of knowledge of the RRV community. As you read on, it will be apparent that this work has already begun.

Rail is key to the UK's economic stability and growth. A collaborative strategic approach is imperative for our supply chain. On that note, I will hand over to Steve to provide an overview of his progression thus far.

## Steve Featherstone speaks

The way in which the railway has evolved over the last 30 years means that railway plant and machines are the workhorses of the railway. These are operated by private companies providing services to Network Rail, regional transport authorities and principal contractors. When all the privately-owned machines are added together, they have a value of around £1 billion and a workforce of about 5,000 people. The RPA provides a means for these individual companies to talk with a collective voice.

Just over 15 years ago, in the aftermath of the train crash at Lambrigg, I joined Network Rail as National Maintenance Director, having previously spent 20 years in the gas industry. I quickly realised the importance of railway plant and machinery and, therefore, met with the key plant suppliers every eight weeks to make sure that I was aware of their issues and concerns and to understand what I could do to help. This two-way dialogue helped both Network Rail, as the client, and the plant providers, as key parts of the supply chain, as we shared ideas, opportunities and suggestions for improvements.

As the industry has become increasingly devolved over the last few years, the rail plant community has struggled to discuss its issues and concerns at the highest levels with their clients. As we approach Christmas, the RPA identified a collective concern that there may not be enough machine operators and Machine Controllers to service all the work. As I have



Steve Featherstone, RPA Consultant.



Collective Mark

now left Network Rail and am working independently, the RPA asked if I could help to escalate their concerns on behalf of the whole supply chain. The reason for this whole supply chain approach is that individual companies are reluctant to raise issues as this may reflect negatively on their organisations in the future.

Prior to Covid-19, there had been around 20 years of sustained railway passenger growth. As part of this, passengers wanted earlier trains and later trains during the week and more leisure trains at weekends. As each franchise was let, these passenger demands were accommodated with additional timetable commitments. There was a virtuous circle of passenger growth and expansion of the timetable. This was great for passengers and great for the railway. But it did have an unintended consequence in that track access opportunities were squeezed with more and more work being scheduled for Saturday night into Sunday morning as the last remaining reasonable access window.

This changing access and work pattern made it increasingly difficult to provide workers with a full week's work and companies started to move away from direct employment to an increasing reliance on contingent resources.

As we approach Christmas, it is estimated that over 85% of the plant operator and Machine Controller resources will be contingent ones. Resource requirements on Christmas Day and Boxing Day are over three times the numbers required on a typical Saturday night. This puts a real strain on the supply chain to find the necessary contingent resources.

Within the RPA community, there is a concern that contingent operators and controllers are signed on with multiple RRV suppliers, which could leave short notice holes in the delivery plans. It feels like Rugby and Liverpool Street in 2007 when the industry had insufficient OLE resources for similar reasons. For the avoidance of doubt, there is not a shortage of machines which can be allocated to jobs. The challenge is getting competent resources to support them.

On behalf of the RPA, I suggested to Network Rail that plant operators should be a named resource within the pre-Christmas risk assessments in a similar way to signal testers and overhead line resources. The RPA arranged a meeting with Network Rail on 30th November to discuss its concerns over the resourcing challenges faced at Christmas and the risks that this presents to both safe work delivery and on-time handback. Hopefully, the RPA's intervention will contribute to safe and successful delivery of the Christmas and New Year works.

In the next Rail Infrastructure, the RPA will reflect on how the Christmas and New Year works were delivered and what lessons

have been learned for next year.

Thanks Steve and we will look forward to the progress and updates in future articles.

## Industry POS panel event meeting at Milton Keynes

On 25th October, a POS panel event meeting was hosted by Simon Morgan, Head of Corporate Safety, Network Rail. Several areas were covered:

- Assurance of POS.
- Visibility of work banks to assist in planning.
- Machine Controller and Crane Controller shortages and the threat that carries to job cancellation.
- POS representative as a Sentinel competence in the future.

These were a sample of topics covered. Simon and his team took away the headlines to work on and agreed a follow-up seminar to be held in February or March 2023. We will keep you posted on any updates.

## Corporate memory (Never forget)

How events from the past can build a safer present and future. For those who do not know, or cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it. As experienced staff retire or change industry. As new staff arrive, and young people are developed. We must ensure that there is a place for regular reminders of past events in our industry that have brought pain and suffering to our colleagues. Plant-related incidents can be avoided with appropriate knowledge and robust plans with effective management. Do you remind your teams of past events? We have that responsibility.

## Communication

Thank you for reading this article. The Management Committee is always open to discussion for members and non-members. Please have a look at the RPA website pages, which can be found on the CPA website as normal. <https://www.cpa.uk.net/special-interest-groups/rail-plant-association-rpa>  
Stay Well, Stay Safe.



Paul Helks, Acting-Chairperson, RPA.