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In high praise of the training course

Perhaps tomorrow's leaders are out there somewhere (ode to management trainees from the front line!)
 by LAWRIE HALL

There are moments when experienced railway operators wax lyrical about the past – when arriving in a senior job was by way of a variety of posts that had given lots of railway knowledge. I wonder, however, to what extent that smacks of rose-coloured spectacles, and an occasional wink in the direction of other ageing (and often retired) colleagues whilst easing on the bedroom slippers?

Of course, today we know that a TOC employee cannot get experience of signalling, nor a Network Rail person enjoy the pleasures of the ticket office. But hang on ...

I seem to remember some of the older operators in the 1960s and 70s moaning and groaning about a sub-human species called the 'bleedin' management trainee'.

I should know – I was one in 1969. That far back, the programme was a full two years, spent in stations, depots, signalboxes, driving cabs ... you name it. Some of it was spent in headquarters offices reading riveting files and making the tea. At the end of two years, if you were lucky, you got a job as a grade C assistant area manager (in my case Newton Abbot) where you spent the formative part of your career taking round the wages, rerailing wagons, convincing signalmen and drivers that you were

authorised to be wearing long trousers, and playing platform inspector on Saturdays when all the regular guys had gone to watch Plymouth Argyle.

If you were lucky, your career did then take you through management posts in all aspects of operating. Sometimes, though, it didn't, and some people found themselves being promoted through a very narrow band of experience, like, say, freight marketing or driver management, – or being stuck in the control, which, in those days, you would never apply to be promoted from, because you could make so much money – and thus acquired no further experience of the wider railway.

What is this old so-and-so getting at?

Simply this: take a person who is competent in their own area of expertise – it could be a signaller, driver, booking clerk, or a graduate who has started in operations planning – provide enough formal education in the wider skills of railway operations, throw in some hands-on experience, develop further with cross-company exchanges, and then set them free to develop.

How?

This is where the IRO comes into its own. It seeks to become the facilitator of the foregoing. When British Railways put its trainees out into their first jobs, they took a risk. When they promoted from this first post the rather green trainee (albeit green with a few edges smoothed out), they took a risk that the 24 year-

People are talking about what's happening



at Westinghouse Rail Systems.



old was going to be able to handle his or her first drivers' depot (or whatever). But, this was not that much of a risk, provided that the individual had taken opportunities to learn the underlying skills behind people management, and how a railway was put together and interacted. Interestingly enough, the operations trainee would have had very little exposure to the vagaries of signal or civil engineering (although, for reasons which are not quite clear even now, in my case, quite a lot of experience of mechanical engineering. To this day I know where to find the turbo-blower on a class 52 diesel hydraulic – I'm blowed if I know what it did, but trust me, I could find one).

At present it would be a bold train operator who recruited a driver manager from the Network Rail Signalling Inspectorate. Network Rail would probably think twice before it took on a TOC retail manager to look after a region's operational safety and, therefore, the narrowing of knowledge, and with it, mutual understanding, has up to now continued.

But why, if the underpinning skills of the wider aspects of running a railway could be imbued by education provided from a

framework developed by the IRO and other industry training providers?

A few years ago one former Railtrack zone advertised in the press for signalling managers, stating that: 'signalling experience was not essential'. Hopefully this unprofessional approach is now well behind us, given the new culture Network Rail is attempting to create. At the time this rather implied that butchers, bakers and candlestick makers might be shortlisted – but not controllers or train planners! It is also not unusual today to find that, in some companies, quite senior posts are recruited from outside the industry – and by this I do not mean just managers, but senior signallers and even COSSes and operational Safety supervisory posts. No one is suggesting that all outside appointments are inappropriate, but in achieving horses for courses it is usually better, nay a requirement, to at least have a horse.

Maybe the seeds of the current problem are there somewhere – you can get managers from anywhere, if you are so inclined, but you are unlikely to get knowledgeable and competent leaders if you don't develop a few internal experts.

I can remember causing a few
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ripples donkeys' years ago, when I appointed an individual to a panel signalbox inspector's job, who had not been a signaller. However, he had plenty of experience in other walks of railway operating life, and once the signallers realised that the fellow knew what he was talking about (and had as good a knowledge of rules, regulations and how to regulate trains properly as they did) he was successful. He was also fairly fond of the human race, which helped his relationship with the signallers. So achieving development and competence requires balance.

This, then, is the motto – educate operators to be better operators,

encourage movement around the industry, and develop pride in the job. Also, work out the difference between management (just watch *The Office* on TV – any resemblance to railway managers you have known is entirely coincidental) and leadership; whereby efficiency, safety, performance and customer needs being met go hand in hand with someone who can put the task and immediate roles around them into the context of a wider picture, including other teams who need to mutually cooperate to achieve all industry goals. Our failure to do this in the recent past has been all too visible, with occasionally disastrous consequences. The time is ripe for a change of approach.

Of course, the industry could make the logical next jump. What about an all-industry jointly-funded scheme for internal high-flyers, and a sprinkling of graduates? Given the forthcoming organisational and contract management changes at Network Rail, this should be easier to coordinate. They could be known as 'bloomin' management trainees' – but no reading files this time.

The industry has toyed with exchanges of the now less numerous residual trainees, but failed so far to develop from within in a holistic way, pan-industry. This is where the IRO has much to offer, as it becomes increasingly an engine of wider knowledge and competence.

Lawrie Hall is **Regional Operations Standards Manager for Network Rail at Swindon**. He has 38 years operations experience, including Operations Manager at Healey Mills, Area Manager at Beckenham and Gloucester, Ops Manager of the Victorian Railways in Australia, Train Planning Manager of BRWR and Area Production Manager for Railtrack at Bristol and Cardiff. He is a Fellow of the Institution of Railway Operators, and lives near Stroud with his wife, Vanessa.

The views expressed here are personal ones and are not necessarily the policy or views of The Institution of Railway Operators.

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR RAILWAY OPERATORS

- Have you got experience of operating the railway?
- Do you want professional recognition, development and qualifications?
- The Institution of Railway Operators has been established to provide a professional structure and qualifications for people with knowledge and experience of operating the railway, at all levels.
- A new information pack is now available for anyone interested in finding out more about the Institution and its education programme. Please e-mail, write, phone or fax to Claire Wickes at the above address if you would like a pack for yourself or colleagues.

MEMBERS' NEWS

Corporate Membership

The following employers operate a Corporate Membership scheme, by paying a one-off annual fee which covers all their employees' Affiliate or Associate membership subscriptions.

(Those with full Membership will continue to pay their subscription personally, irrespective of whether they can subsequently claim it back from their employer through expenses).

Network Rail, London

Underground Ltd, Wales and Borders, Freightliner, Virgin Trains, First North Western, First Great Eastern, First Great Western, Go-Ahead Group, Transport for London, Docklands Light Railway, Thames Trains, South Central, Thameslink, Stagecoach Rail, London Lines, GB Railways, Sheffield Supertram, WAGN, Anglia Railways, Island Line, Silverlink Trains, Hull Trains, South West Trains, c2c, GB Railfreight, EWS Railway, Northern Ireland Railways, South Eastern Trains, Iarnród Éireann, Corus Rail Consultancy, ScotRail, Central Trains.

DIARY OF EVENTS

MIDLANDS AREA

Dates of next meetings:

- Monday 26 April 2004
- For information on all Midlands Area events, please contact Julia Stanyard on 0121 345 3091 (NOTE CHANGE OF NUMBER) or email us at Midlands@railwayoperators.org

SOUTH EAST AREA

- Monday 24 May 3004 - Ray Price, Operations Director, Arriva Trains

All meetings take place at the Union Jack Club, Sandell Street, Waterloo. Doors open at 18:00 and the talks commence at 18:30.

To contact the South East area on any subject please send an e-mail to:

Southeast@railwayoperators.org

NORTH EAST AREA

- Tuesday 4 May. Visit to Neville Hill depot. Meet at 17:45 in front of WH Smith on Leeds station concourse for minibus to/from depot. Stout footwear required - other PPE will be provided on site.

As places are limited it is essential that you e-mail mike.hogg@ews-railway.co.uk if you wish to attend. Places will be confirmed by e-mail. Return to Leeds station by minibus by 20:30.

North East Area meetings normally take place at 17:30 for 18:00, at York, and full details will be published in advance each month in this column.

For further news on the IRO in the North East contact us at: Northeast@railwayoperators.org

SCOTTISH AREA

For information on all Scottish events and matters, please contact Scottish@railwayoperators.org or phone Douglas Kerr on 0141 335 5430.

SOUTH WEST AREA

An all-day, Saturday event has been arranged for 24 April, to visit Mendip Rail, and Merehead Quarry operations near Cranmore, meeting at Westbury for road transport.

Lunch will be at a suitable location in the Merehead area.

Please put this one in your diaries – full details will be sent out to South West Area members and any others that get in touch

to express an interest.

For all events, contact Lawrie Hall, internal 07 79307, mobile 07771 827797 or email Southwest@railwayoperators.org

NORTH WEST AREA

- Wednesday 26 May - 18:00 for 18:30. Visit to Longsight Depot. Future meeting dates:

- Wednesday 15 September
- Wednesday 17 November – venue to be advised.

The North West branch has held a number of very informative and interesting visits and presentations since our inception, but we can only make further progress if we are able to attract more committed individuals.

The numbers of the branch continue to grow and our council will be planning further visits and presentations in order to widen the knowledge and understanding of members.

However, we need some new blood as some people are taking the opportunity to develop their careers and are therefore moving out of the area.

If you think that you have something to offer, or want to make a difference, then please contact Clive Evans (details below).

We always welcome new and prospective members to our informal, friendly and informative gatherings in the North West.

For details please contact: Clive Evans on 01270-629009 or email us at:

Northwest@railwayoperators.org