

The project professional

WHATEVER THE PROJECT – FROM UNDERGROUND INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENT TO CREATING A NEW TRAIN OPERATING COMPANY FROM SCRATCH – **BRIAN RAVEN**, THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF HEATHROW EXPRESS, HAS AN IMPRESSIVE TRACK RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT. NOW, AS HE EXPLAINS TO **ANDREW GOODMAN**, THE NEXT PROJECT HE FACES IS MAKING HEATHROW CONNECT A SUCCESS

ASK BRIAN RAVEN TO SUMMARISE WHY HIS 25 YEARS to date in railways have been such a success, and he is characteristically modest: 'It's really just all about people and processes.'

Don't be fooled. As I discovered when meeting Raven for the first time last month, at the Siemens rolling stock manufacturing facility near Dusseldorf, there's a lot more to it than that.

We were at Krefeld to look at the new class 360/2 rolling stock, which will form the new Heathrow Connect train service due to be launched next spring. It quickly becomes apparent that a key component in Raven's ability to deliver a project is getting the right supplier on board in the first place. His relationship with Siemens began with Heathrow Express and it was the natural choice for the new service.

'We are delighted with the Siemens fleet,' he explains. 'We have just been able to extend heavy maintenance intervals from 450,000 to 850,000 miles, which underlines the quality of the product we have purchased – at gearbox stripdowns we have found virtually no wear – the engineering is superb.'

So, getting a good supplier and sticking with it – perhaps that's lesson number one. Secondly, it's quickly clear that it helps if railways are in the blood; Raven is a third generation Swindon railwayman. He chose civil engineering as a profession, and a sponsorship with London Underground working a sandwich course through City University, but soon switched to project management, something that dominated his next 20 years of railway experience.

And then, finally, it's learning your trade. Raven started with London Underground during the 1980s, improving and

reconstructing tube stations and infrastructure. After the seismic changes wrought by the Kings Cross fire in 1989, Raven was made responsible for implementing a number of the recommendations from the subsequent enquiry, including the removal and replacement of wooden escalators and the introduction of sprinkler systems. Later ground-breaking projects included the first contracting-out of major track works on LU, and the introduction of personnel assessment systems and development centres to help build the new Jubilee line engineering team.

As Raven explains, this new territory of 'soft' project management had to interface with 'hard'.

'The job included structuring new working relationships between LUL and its first contracted – non in-house – rolling stock maintenance contract with supplier Alstom.'

Taken together, what is clear is that all the history and lessons learned at the coalface proved the perfect grounding for Raven's key new role, when the blank sheet of paper called 'Heathrow Express' dropped into his life.

Raven recalls: 'Joining in 1996 as Engineering Director, I was employee number four at Heathrow Express. Setting up the engineering team and maintenance contracts was an exciting time. We were creating a wholly new company right through to the recruitment of front-line staff.'

Subsequently the multi-skilled Raven made the move into the role of Operations Director, which included responsibility for customer service, and he became Managing Director in June 2001.

This was the top job that Raven relished getting. 'I was itching to do it! I wanted to get hold of it, give it a better

A middle-aged man with grey hair, glasses, and a mustache is smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. The background shows a textile factory with various fabrics hanging on racks.

‘For me, part of the beauty of Heathrow Express – and now Heathrow Connect – is that we are not part of the contract-led railway... For us, if a proposal is a benefit to our customer, we just go ahead and do it’



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structure. The people who join a new company at its formative stages have boundless enthusiasm and a clear set of skills to achieve that outcome. They were a fantastic team of people – but not all those people are necessarily the same people you want running and developing the company in the longer term. It requires quite a different makeup.’

Since then Raven has led that team in a strong record of achievement as a train operator.

‘I think, that over the last couple of years, we are getting better at seeing what is important to the customer, improving it and, most of all, ensuring our service is consistently good. We are proud to shout that we represent excellent customer service. But it takes a lot of effort to deliver that promise and live up to that expectation day in, day out. We provide one of the most reliable train services in the UK, having driven down cancellations caused by ourselves – we cancelled just 179 booked services across the whole of last year – that’s a staggering improvement since our first year of operation.’

But problems persist: ‘Our overall punctuality performance is not as good as three years ago at the height of the post-Hatfield depression. We are working closely with Network Rail and there has been a good deal of success, especially since it took track maintenance back in-house.

‘Elsewhere we have upgraded ticket machines and are

halfway through internal refurbishment of our fleet. It may appear to be a like-for-like replacement, but things like the fabrics – the quality and durability have been improved dramatically. We are determined to ensure that the passenger does not detect any drop in standards. Our customers detect that our standards are high too – our quality service measures currently rate us at 63 per cent “good” or “excellent” – and that’s rising.’

And, not least, Heathrow Express has been successful at helping its owner, BAA, to increase levels of traffic accessing the airport via public transport. This was the real driver for BAA to invest in the new service; it remains a central issue in supporting future growth at Heathrow Airport and the commitment to Terminal Five. This too is the reason why now, with Heathrow Express under its belt, the airport operator has looked at further ways of increasing rail services and has announced the new stopping Heathrow Connect service. It comes as no surprise to discover that Raven is central to the plans.

‘BAA is very happy with how Heathrow Express has developed and delivered, but the airport simply needs more train services. Having thought through all the options, we concluded that a joint venture to provide a stopping service with the existing local franchise operator into Paddington was the best option.’

However, this was not an easy process, as Raven recalls: ‘We consulted with the SRA, which supported the proposal and outlined its plans for a combined and enlarged Greater Western franchise. With the tendering process ongoing, that meant we negotiated separately with both Thames Trains and First Great Western. In practice, this process of trying to balance both negotiations proved to be a minefield! We eventually put three agreements in place – one with Thames Trains, one with First and one with the SRA.’

With that hurdle cleared, Raven was able to proceed rapidly. ‘Once the agreement with the SRA was in place, during June 2003, we began contract negotiations with our preferred supplier – Siemens – for the rolling stock, and once First was confirmed as the successful Greater Western franchise operator, we quickly confirmed heads of terms for the joint venture. By December 2003 the major modifications to Old Oak Common depot were under way. The depot represents an awesome piece of work, with major works taking place alongside the ongoing maintenance operations for our existing fleet. For example, we have had to utilise a remarkable “sliding” pile-driving technique to minimise vibration to the surrounding ground. Osbornes is heading the depot works – a company we like and have an experience of working successfully with. Meanwhile, we have been progressing the safety case acceptance with Siemens and Network Rail for the new stock and making changes to our operator’s safety case for HSE approval.’

The new service has sensitive issues surrounding it too. Fundamental to the deal is that it represents no additional cost to the SRA or the franchise business; it has to maintain regulated fares and comply with PSR levels, as Raven explains: ‘Using current pathways at 08 and 38 minutes past the hour, Heathrow Connect will provide a 27-minute stopping service between the airport and London Paddington. The service will

call at stations via Ealing Broadway to Hayes, and it is this element of the service we provide under contract and on behalf of First. It will provide a valuable additional underground connection at Ealing and will interchange at Hayes with incoming First Great Western Link services from the west.

'The services will supplement existing commuter services on the line, the fares will remain regulated and all the revenues between Hayes and Paddington will remain with First. Between Hayes and the airport the service is operated wholly under our own safety case and all ticket sales over this route will be Heathrow Connect's.'

Heathrow Connect will operate within the Heathrow Express company accounts, and the drivers – or 'Customer Service Operators' as they call them – will be shared with the existing operation. However, in all other respects, the new Heathrow Connect services will deliberately be kept very separate from Heathrow Express. Train liveries will be different and will include the First Group logo, while the on-board staffing will be done through an entirely separate team.

'We want to ensure that there is plenty of blue water between the very different Heathrow Express and Heathrow Connect services,' declares Raven, and with the premium farebox of Heathrow Express to protect, its easy to understand why he is so adamant to retain this distinction.

'At Paddington you will be able to buy a Heathrow Connect ticket to stations as far as Hayes – but not for the full journey to Heathrow. If a passenger wants to go to the airport it's a Heathrow Express ticket at £13. Heathrow Connect services from the airport will be shown with Ealing Broadway as the final destination.'

Hmm... History suggests that this sort of passenger-management may end up being peppered with problems and

bad publicity, but Raven remains confident. 'We don't see that it will be any different from other stations like Reading or Swindon where a variety of companies provide services to the same location.'

Whatever the issues, Raven is confident that the new services will be in place by the spring. Achieving this would be a further feather in the cap for Raven, and it's clearly a challenge he relishes. 'For me, part of the beauty of Heathrow Express – and now Heathrow Connect – is that we are not part of the contract-led railway... For us, if a proposal is a benefit to our customer, we just go ahead and do it!'

So what of the future? For Raven his next 20 years appear wedded to the future development of Heathrow Airport.

'It's been very exciting from day one with Heathrow Express, and with Heathrow Connect in our portfolio that's now continuing. The future looks full of exciting challenges too, with the £4bn expansion of Terminal 5 requiring further developments of the train services, and with capacity to incorporate services direct from the west. We also are keen, at that point, to take over full control of our own infrastructure and signalling from Network Rail.'

And with that look into the crystal ball, it becomes apparent that BAA's train operating aspirations are far from fulfilled. Raven states that BAA is not looking to move from its core business into a role as a wider train operator, but admits the relationship between the company and the wider rail industry is changing: 'We are currently associate members of ATOC and, as part of our new responsibilities, are interested in becoming full members.'

For BAA and Raven a wider range and number of rail projects appear to be well within their capabilities – and possibly within their grasp.

