



# A NEW BREED OF LEADERS

The global rail industry has undergone a metamorphosis in the past 10 years. What does this mean for the people – and organisations – aiming to succeed in the new-look sector? Industry headhunter Iain Brockbank, of Warren Partners, offers some insight.



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Today, rail experience is sometimes desirable, but rarely a critical qualification. The leaders sought by rail companies are as likely to come with a background in aviation, retail, defence, or the oil and gas sector.

It's just one effect of the winds of change that have blown through the bastion of tradition that was the rail industry.

In part, the changes are influenced by the general air of volatility that has come to dominate the business scene since the financial crash.

But they are also driven by a huge investment in infrastructure across the world – from South America to India, from the UK to the Middle East – and by a new focus on collaboration and customer service.

## Customer experience

The latter point is a critical one. It seems counter-intuitive now, but the experience of the end user has not always led the industry's agenda. Today, by contrast, there is a universal drive among industry leaders to make best use of the billions being invested to create a seamless, high-quality passenger experience.

Technology investment, which was woeful in the industry, is now being channelled to this cause. The UK's cross-industry Rail Technical Strategy is a case in point, looking ahead 30 years with the aim of harnessing technology for a resilient, efficient, customer-focused rail service.

Yes, it's about offering WiFi on the train, but it goes far beyond that. It seeks to enhance the rail user's experience in the broadest possible sense, from the point they buy their travel tickets or park their car at the station.

People who are attuned to such initiatives – those able to innovate by bringing fresh thinking to practical issues – are much in demand. That's why innovation is one of the skills that now features prominently in our search briefs. And it's why rail companies are keen to draw talent from other industries, people who can breathe new ideas into the organisation.

## Partnership approach

**'Essential: 15 years' rail experience.' I remember a time when this was invariably the top line of the person specification for any rail leadership role.**

Relationship building is another skill that appears reliably among the criteria of hiring companies. Collaboration is now the name of the game. The old adversarial and 'fractured' culture dies hard, but those who adapt to this trend are reaping rewards.

For instance, when Transport for London tendered for the £600m project to extend the Northern Line, they put a strong emphasis on collaboration in the belief that this approach was more likely to generate innovation. The Laing O'Rourke/Ferrovial JV successfully captured this imperative in their bid. This focus is likely to be apparent with further major projects including when HS2 is tendered.

Likewise, alliance building is a key industry theme, requiring leaders able to work across old established 'divides', creating shared goals and a sense of common purpose.

No player in the industry can afford to ignore the need for partnership working, including the increasing need to 'get things done' within a wide range of political and commercial interests. Leaders today need to work effectively within a complex network of stakeholders: national and local government; infrastructure owners; unions; contractors; consultants – ensuring that relationships remain strong and that goals are aligned.

## International outlook

Today's successful leader is also one with a global perspective. The international nature of many operators' businesses makes that unavoidable. The trend towards interoperability, as embodied in ERTMS and similar initiatives, underlines the breakdown of national borders in the industry.

Candidates who are culturally aware and adaptable enough to work comfortably in different territories are in high demand.

Multi-lingualism doesn't hurt, either: the rail industry is increasingly taking a cue from leading business schools, which often require MBA students to learn a second language as part of their courses.

## Quest for diversity

Rail companies are increasingly looking to make their top layers more diverse. As a headhunter I sometimes challenge our clients about whether they are casting

their net widely enough to ensure diversity (another word rarely heard in the industry only a decade ago).

This is not simply about achieving a representative mix of leaders in terms of gender and ethnicity – though these are certainly important.

Diversity is a pre-requisite to the fresh thinking I mentioned earlier. It incorporates diversity of thought and thought leadership, as well as background and experience. It requires an assessment of candidates' values and characteristics, to ensure the broadest possible outlook in the boardroom and the executive suite.

In outlining this new landscape, I don't wish to dismiss the value of longstanding rail industry experience and knowledge. Increasingly, however, even 'technical' roles, including Engineering Directors, must demonstrate a full range of leadership qualities such as those I've mentioned – and many do. Those retaining a 'traditional approach' may need to augment their expertise with new skills, or risk being left behind.

## Successful businesses

This applies as much to companies as to individuals. The cast of players in the global industry has changed considerably. Today's successful businesses, and those who are most attractive to the strongest leaders, are those which have brought fresh ideas to the market.

The wealth of investment is luring in new players both large and small. This is certainly the case with technology companies. Smaller suppliers are making an impact, benefiting from their agility and flexibility. Those that prosper will show they can develop solutions that meet real customer needs, rather than clever technology for its own sake.

The direction of travel is clear. For individuals and businesses alike, the key qualities for success in tomorrow's industry are innovative thinking, a flair for building strong partnerships and stakeholder relationships, an international outlook and, above all, an unrelenting focus on improving the experience of rail travellers.

Like all change, this is a revolution that some will find uncomfortable. But it's making our industry an exciting place to work.