

# Why industry needs youth to get it back on the right track

There is an urgent demand in the rail sector to attract more young recruits – one that TransPennine Express is approaching with determination and innovation

by **Mike Howlett**

**T**HE RAIL SECTOR IN THE NORTH of England is currently enjoying unprecedented levels of investment and growth as it emerges as the key player in a resurgent region. This is underpinned by an ongoing major recruitment initiative to attract a young, diverse workforce to complement the existing tried and tested skills of current employees for them jointly to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Whereas rail has made substantial inroads of late in attracting the next wave of engineers, customer service experts and innovation professionals needed to meet the ever increasing demands of customers in a digital age, it must do more to create a mixed and diverse workforce that accurately reflects the communities it serves.

Typically, whereas customers once arrived a few minutes before their train time and went to the ticket office, these have been replaced by online ticket sales and mobile downloads, meaning existing staff have a new skills set to learn in order to support existing customers.

The lack of age group diversity, compounded by the fact that careers in the rail industry have always been much sought after, thanks to the benefits offered by a career in rail resulting in a churn rate of below 3%.

One person who is well aware of the recruitment challenge facing rail is Sue Whaley, the Human Resources (HR) Director for TransPennine Express (TPE), one of the fastest growing operators in the UK.

As a former senior operations manager in the food industry – a sector in which she worked for 16 years – she brings to her role at TPE the benefit of an operational viewpoint.

“Like the rest of the rail sector, our workforce is ageing,” she says. “Out of 1,095 colleagues, 68% are aged 40 and over and only 4% are aged 25 and under.”

“This shows the size of the demographic time bomb approaching should these older colleagues choose to retire in the next 10 years – and this issue

is wide-spread throughout the rail industry.

“Our people tend to see it as a job for life, which is fantastic, and the knowledge and experience we retain through this is vital to our business. However, it needs to be balanced and it’s important that we also look at things with a fresh pair of eyes.”

TPE is currently working with the Rail Delivery Group – Sue Whaley sits on the HR group – and works with other bodies including the National Skills Academy for Rail to meet a range of diversity objectives for the industry.

Female staff – or the lack of them as there are only 19.5% at TPE mirroring the situation across the whole sector (though TPE bucks the national trend at both executive and management levels) – is high on the agenda as is achieving an ethnic diversity that best reflects the communities the company serves.

But it is the need to get young people into the rail industry which remains key for TPE, as this could in itself help to resolve some of the diversity issues. This means delivering the message that young people don’t necessarily need to be rail enthusiasts who like the idea of being a driver or a conductor as there is a vast range of job opportunities that await them including accountancy, planning, customer service, IT, safety and HR – an extensive list.

“Technology though remains a priority for rail and as an industry we have not always been the fastest moving in this area,” adds Sue Whaley. “However, we are becoming more technology based and it’s key that we employ more experts in this field. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects are particularly important.

“The young people who are coming out of school today have never known anything but a digital world and these are the people to give us the step change in the way we operate the railway. Traditionally we have had older people trying to mould recruits into our way of doing things but now we have to learn from them; they need to mould us!

“The issue we face is how best to reach out to them as there are not many who

are aware of the benefits of a career in rail,” she adds.

Whereas working for a rail operator might not be on the radar of many young people, one position bucks the trend – that of the train driver. For whenever TPE advertises the position of trainees on line, it regularly receives more than 1,000 applications within the first 36 hours.

Train driving aside, TPE is prioritising a multi-pronged campaign to recruit young people with the skills needed to keep the operator firmly on track. And the company has successfully laid the groundwork for this by already filling key positions including both in social media and innovation.

The latest apprentice programme has now started and eight young people aged 17 to 22 have joined TPE in the North. Sue Whaley intends to ensure the company exceeds the target of 36 laid down to meet the terms of the company’s franchise over the next five years.

So what are the requirements to become an apprentice?

“Maths and English at GCSE is a basic requirement but in terms of engineering apprentices they may have higher qualifications,” says Sue Whaley. “Overall though they need to be able to work as part of a team, work collaboratively and be great with customers.

“They will come in with ways of doing things that will be quite alien to us but we need to leverage their skill sets in our business.”

Yet another TPE initiative will see it working with the Prince’s Trust next year when it will take in two groups of 10 young people who are struggling to access the workplace for a period of



Sue Whaley believes that it is key to employ more people with expertise in technological areas



four weeks to introduce them to the rail industry and also offer them some training and development in terms of job skills.

However, arguably the project which is likely to have the greatest impact in the long term for TPE is its involvement with the Make the Grade Programme in West Yorkshire and Teesside run by the Ahead Partnership, a social enterprise venture which connects businesses, communities and schools. This is enabling TPE to reach out to secondary

schoolchildren as young as 11 to educate them about the rail industry and what it might offer when they eventually leave school. The main message here is that there are more opportunities in rail than focusing solely on becoming a conductor or a driver.”

Heading this up is a new recruit to the rail sector himself – Duane Stott – who has been TPE’s Learning and Development Manager for the past 15 months. Before that he was an RAF Squadron Leader having served in both Iraq and Afghanistan and being in charge of Air Traffic Control at military airfields.

He finds himself in a dual role – ensuring TPE’s management team are developed in terms of leadership (a skill he first honed in two decades in the RAF) and subsequently complemented with an MSc from Manchester Business School in organisational psychology. He also finds himself tasked with seeing that the next generation of the company’s employees are up to speed in a customer-centred business within an increasingly technology based industry.

It is the latter that has seen Duane lead TPE’s participation in the Make the Grade programme.

With a target of reaching more than



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Duane Stott is leading TPE's participation in the Make the Grade programme

1,000 schoolchildren aged from 11 to 17, many of them from underprivileged areas, a 40-strong TPE team ranging from frontline colleagues to managers are hoping to inspire them to become the rail professionals of the future, so giving both the industry, and the North itself, the competitive edge to achieve its true potential.

To do this, they have been taking part in career-style events – where students hop from one company table to another like a form of speed dating – one-to-one interview sessions and visits to Huddersfield Railway Station where TPE has its training and development facility, The Hub.

Apart from explaining what they do, the TPE staff involved also get the opportunity to find out what the schoolchildren know about the possibilities about working in rail. The answer, it seems, is very little.

Conductor Jo Ronson for one was surprised that “many of them had never even been on a train, having either travelled on a school bus or transported by mum and dad.”

So she reports it became “a real eye opener” to them when they learned what went on behind the scenes in terms of IT, engineering and planning. It also became an eye opener for the TPE conductor – though it wouldn't have been for the company's social

media and digital marketing team – when she attempted to talk to the kids about the use of social media in the rail sector. “They ended up teaching me. I was amazed to find out there were more than 15 social media outlets when I'm only using two,” said Jo Ronson.

But how much impact will such events have on the kids? “A lot of them seemed very interested but they are very young so only time will tell,” she added.

Meanwhile, TPE driver Chris Fairclough is one of the team of company volunteers taking part in the Make the Grade programme.

“It was good to make them aware that there are hundreds of non-frontline roles” he says. “The group I was involved with was 16 to 17 year olds who were already thinking about engineering, so they were interested in that side of it rather than driving.”

Steve Adshead, the Senior Planning Manager at TPE, was able to illustrate the appeal of rail as a career. Having graduated with a degree in chemistry, he joined the railways 28 years ago as “a temporary job” and is still there.

During that time, he has worked his way up through the ranks, starting in the ticket office before becoming a driver, then moving into planning 15 years ago. That meant he was able to give first-hand experience of the rail planners' role to the young people.

“It's like putting a giant jigsaw together,” he says. “However a lot of them were shocked when we told them that for some jobs we didn't use a computer but handled it manually with a pencil.”

But how interested were the children on the programme? “Some were very interested,” he recalls. “Despite a job seeming a long way off at the age of 12 it is important to get them thinking as to whether they should focus on maths, which is important for planning.”

“This is a new venture trying to get to raise awareness of the wide variety of roles available as it is important to get more talent into our industry even if it is in 10 years' time.

“Fortunately the mindset about rail is changing. It is now increasingly seen as a value to society where it wasn't 30 years ago. That's good because it is not just about us growing but also about doing our bit to take the North further.”

***It was an eye opener for them to learn what goes on in terms of IT and planning***

## Addressing gender balance reflects commitment to local communities

### TPE in successful bid to attract more women to industry

By Mike Howlett

**T**HE MOVE BY TPE TO ADDRESS THE issue of women making up only 20% of the rail industry is reflected in its latest cohort of apprenticeships with an equal gender balance among the eight new arrivals.

Two of the women, both aged 18, Caitlin Gent from Chorley and Colette Stocks from Wigan are taking up positions in departments which according to Sue Whaley, HR Director at TPE have “struggled to attract women” – Caitlin in engineering, Colette in train planning.

“It's really important to us that our workforce represents the communities we serve, so this is a great step in that direction,” added Sue Whaley.

Under the current seven-year franchise agreement, TPE is committed to take on a total 37 apprentices but expects that it will well exceed that target.

All the current batch of apprentices had to complete an on-line application form, which included a questionnaire, through the FirstGroup website.

The 26 young people on the final shortlist drawn from more than 220 applicants were invited to attend an assessment centre event which included a team exercise, an individual exercise (literacy or numeracy based depend on the role) and a 45-minute face-to-face interview with two recruiting managers.

All successful apprentice applicants have an assigned volunteer mentor as

well as their line manager. The mentors are drawn from relevant parts of the business and have all attended apprentice mentorship training.

Seven of the apprentices are working toward a Level 2 Customer Service Framework with the Manchester College. This will be delivered at The Hub in Huddersfield for the first 12 weeks, then every four weeks after that until completion by September 2017. Further qualifications will be based on the need and interest of the individual.

Caitlin, the engineering apprentice is working toward a Level 3 BTEC Foundation in Electrical Engineering with Preston College – a two-year programme until July 2017, followed by an assessment in the workplace in September 2018.

After studying for her A-Levels at Cardinal Newman College, Preston, Caitlin decided that she “wanted more than



The TPE's current batch of eight apprentices, a group which was drawn from more than 220 applicants

university could offer”, preferring on the job training and experience “while earning a wage and getting a foot in the door of a fast developing company.”

She first developed an interest in engineering as a member of Chorley Sea Cadets and so decided to turn something she enjoyed into a career.

“I never imagined myself working for the railway. As a customer you are obli-

ous to all the hard work that takes place behind closed doors,” she recalls,

“However through my own research and work experience, I realised how many opportunities the railway has to offer and most importantly how rewarding it can be. So far I am thoroughly enjoying the apprenticeship scheme and I'm really looking forward to progressing in the future.”