

Jean-Philippe Peuziat

Head of Public Affairs
UNIFE

Time to HOP on board

Today, rail is a cornerstone of European life. For almost 200 years, trains have whisked travellers across the continent and moved billions of tonnes of goods with ease, creating and sustaining hundreds of thousands of jobs within the rail sector and millions more indirectly. Although the industry has moved on a long way from the past romance of the *Orient Express* and the steam era, today's innovative and increasingly digitalised railways are still essential to European daily life from Portugal to Estonia and beyond.

This past year has demonstrated rail's key role in keeping Europe's economies moving, carrying essential workers, medical equipment, and time-critical freight during the worst pandemic to strike the continent in 100 years.

We are seeing a resurgence of interest in rail from Brussels, with the ambitious EU Green Deal and the declaration of 2021 as the European Year of Rail. However, there is a serious and growing skills shortage in the European rail sector. An older, overwhelmingly male, workforce is reaching retirement age, reflecting under-recruitment in decades gone by, while new skills are needed to keep abreast of rapid digitalisation.

If we are to create a Single European Railway Area equipped with the next generation technologies needed to achieve EU sustainability goals and support economic prosperity, we must attract and retain students and workers and provide them with the right skills and training to develop and operate the rail system of tomorrow.

Quantifying the problem

While the railways themselves have been aware of a growing recruitment crisis for a decade or more, the issue of skills in the wider rail sector came to the forefront politically in 2019, with the publication of the European Commission's *Study on the Competitiveness of the Rail Supply Industry*. This identified the 'promotion of the development of skills and safeguard of access to skilled labour' as a priority action point.

The Commission stressed that 'the supply of technical engineers may become a bottleneck in maintaining the competitive position of the EU rail supply industry', impacting on its ability to innovate and implement the 'green and digitalised' rail technologies that

Innovation and digitalisation are changing young people's perception of railways, while opening up attractive career opportunities. Work is underway to rethink rail-related training and education, in order to provide the skills needed to shape sustainable mobility for the future.



Investment in new and enhanced infrastructure is making rail travel more attractive to environmentally aware young people, while opening up job opportunities.

will hopefully make Europe the world's first carbon-neutral continent by 2050.

The skills challenge was also addressed extensively in the subsequent *Final Report of the EC Expert Group on the Competitiveness of the EU Rail Supply Industry*, adopted in October 2019. This confirmed that 'in view of the ageing population, a significant cohort of employees is expected to retire within the coming years'. It also found that 'transformation related to digital and high-tech technologies creates mismatches between available and demanded skills'. Companies across the EU member states were already 'reporting difficulties to find railway engineers'.

Noting that 'the digital transformation of the supply industry will have a strong impact on production, processes and skills needed', the report stressed that the need for ICT skills and broader

technological know-how was becoming all-encompassing, essentially requiring all positions to have some degree of digital competence.

The problem of a 'decreasing workforce due to ageing [and] perception of an unattractive sector' could be exacerbated by the 'changing skill requirements due to the digital transformation' unless the available opportunities were communicated and the educational and vocational training pathways reformed to meet the needs of tomorrow. These mounting challenges necessitated action without delay.

Environmental awareness

Growing environmental awareness among the wider public offers both a challenge and an opportunity for rail. As the world witnesses more implicit consequences of climate change

— ranging from wildfires in Australia and Siberia to the recent cold snaps in Texas that led to severe energy shortages and property damage — there is a growing appetite for more sustainability. And, as the world's most sustainable form of mass transport, rail offers an attractive career path for young and experienced talent alike.

A recent survey conducted by international think tank ThinkYoung for the Hop On For Our Planet initiative found a clear desire amongst Gen Z Europeans for more sustainable solutions. Approximately 60% of respondents from the six member states surveyed — France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Spain and the Netherlands — said they were willing to alter their travel habits to practice sustainability. Recognising rail's green credentials, 57% of these youngsters supported the



provision of more attractive incentives to encourage greater use of trains, while 47% wanted to see greater investment in infrastructure and services.

Most reassuringly, 44.8% of Gen Z respondents cared about sustainability and climate change, and believed that rail has a positive impact on society. No fewer than 34% of female respondents studying Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics said that a positive impact on society would attract them to a career in rail. With such an appetite for fulfilling, sustainable careers, the first step has to be raising awareness about opportunities in the rail sector.

To attract job seekers to our sector and fill the gap that already exists, leading rail industry players from SMEs to the major manufacturers and systems integrators launched the Hop On For Our Planet initiative (www.hoponrail.eu). This aims

to demonstrate that our industry is getting Europe's tech and green future on the fast track.

A major social media campaign across the same six member states used Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to communicate the wealth of career paths that exist in rail — ranging from manufacturing and production through Artificial Intelligence and engineering to data analysis and machine learning. The campaign provided personal testimonies from young professionals about the fulfilment that working in rail has provided them, and flagged up any vacancies at the leading rail suppliers.

Focus on skills

However, there are additional levers that can be pulled. Seeking to improve the provision of essential skills, European rail supply industry association UNIFE has been working with stakeholders across the rail, education and vocational training sectors to bolster the teaching and course options for young people and employees across Europe so as to best prepare them for the future of our industry.

Following discussions within the EC Expert Group on the Competitiveness of the EU Rail Supply Industry, as well as a request from UNIFE, the Commission shortlisted the rail industry as one of six industry sectors eligible for the creation of an Erasmus+ Blueprint for Sectoral Co-operation on Skills.

A Blueprint is an EU-funded framework for strategic co-operation between key businesses, trade unions, education and vocational training stakeholders and public authorities. The aim is to promote an overall sectoral skills strategy that includes concrete actions to address short- and medium-term skills needs.

After several months of preparation, UNIFE and 31 other partners ranging from suppliers, railway operators and infrastructure managers to vocational schools, universities and regional authorities — submitted their formal proposal for such a European project in February 2020, and it was approved by the Commission during the summer. Entitled Skill Training Alliance For the Future European Rail system, or STAFFER for short, the project was launched at the end of the year and is now fully operational as the Blueprint for the rail sector.

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The objective of STAFFER is to help identify the main skill gaps that exist and assess the future needs of our industry, in order to optimise the vocational education and training delivered through various institutions and technical universities. Over the next four years, the consortium will generate 'adaptation proposals' to improve curricula, training schemes and educational programmes to address new technological developments and trends across the rail sector.

This collective effort will expand the opportunities available to students starting at the secondary and higher education levels, as well as experienced professionals already employed in our sector and those seeking new challenges.

As we hopefully approach the tail end of the pandemic, European citizens need to begin to pursue a more resilient union, both in terms of the economy and its impact on the environment. Transport, and more specifically rail, will be a key element in the green and digital transition required to achieve climate neutrality, which is arguably the most ambitious objective in the EU Green Deal.

Achieving a significant modal shift to rail and constructing a new form of seamless multimodality will need both time and skills. At the moment, neither is a luxury that our sector has. With an ageing workforce rapidly approaching a well-deserved retirement and the accelerating pace of digitalisation, Europe's rail sector — both suppliers and operators — needs a new generation of skilled professionals bringing a diverse set of competences.

We are confident that the Hop On For Our Planet campaign will raise awareness of the meaningful employment options available in our sector in the short-term. However, a sustained commitment to skills and training is needed to attract new recruits and equip them to design and implement the requisite mobility paradigm of tomorrow. As the European Rail Skills Alliance, STAFFER is an important development to that end. The 32 stakeholders in the consortium represent all strata of both our sector and academia to achieve this goal.

UNIFE is proud to be a leading player in both of these initiatives, and we are grateful for the foresight and commitment that our partners have demonstrated through their engagement. In the European Year of Rail and beyond, our sector is determined to provide young Europeans and experienced professionals with the knowledge and skills they will need to pursue impactful careers in our sector and to build a genuinely sustainable transport mix for the future. 

Digital skills are increasingly required in many different aspects of railway operations as well as the manufacturing and supply sector.

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