

# Migration is key to a sustainable railway

Co-operation between suppliers, operators and regulators is essential if technical advances are to deliver an efficient, cost-effective and competitive railway, incoming UNIFE Director General **Enno Wiebe** tells **Chris Jackson**.

**T**he European rail supply industry is an 'ideal partner' for the European Union's new strategy to address competitiveness and climate change, believes recently appointed UNIFE Director General Enno Wiebe. Welcoming the proposals unveiled by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on July 18 to improve how Europe does business, during her second term, he wants her team to come and discuss how the rail sector is well placed to help boost productivity and cut greenhouse gas emissions.

'We don't buy into divisive rhetoric over Europe's priorities,' Wiebe insists. 'Competitiveness and climate action go hand in hand, and one does not have to be at the expense of the other. A Clean Industrial Deal is the right way to be looking at these dual problems. With the right job-creating rules in place, our industry has the ability to transform European transport networks and to breathe life back into the industrial ecosystem across many supply chains.'

According to UNIFE, the rail sector is now 'an agile and modern industry', with its members reporting an annual turnover of around €45-8bn and employing some 650,000 people. The association argues that reducing regulatory red tape, enforcing a level playing field for global trade and encouraging technological advances would enable radical improvements in productivity and create more jobs in a transport sector that has a very low environmental footprint, as well as supporting economic advances in parts of the EU that 'increasingly feel deprived of services and job opportunities'.

## Identifying priorities

Formerly Technical Director of the Community of European Railways & Infrastructure Managers, Wiebe is keen

to encourage closer dialogue between suppliers, operators and regulatory bodies, with a view to driving competitiveness and encouraging investment in rail.

Wiebe joined UNIFE on June 1, succeeding long-serving Director General Philippe Citroën, and spent his first weeks in office consulting widely amongst member companies to identify UNIFE's priorities for the next few years. 'As always,' he reports, 'the top three are market competitiveness, the deployment of new technologies, and the sustainability agenda.'

'In terms of the marketplace, we need to address the issue of non-EU players, setting and following fair rules for competition. And then we have discussed deployment, and the elephant in the room that is ERTMS, while we have FRMCS and DAC coming along as well.'

Asked what he can bring to UNIFE from his experience across the rail sector, Wiebe insists that 'co-operation between the railway operating community and the supply industry is absolutely essential. I have 25 years of experience with the operating community. I studied railway engineering, and that's where I grew up. I think it is very, very important that we are not fighting, but really working with each other. We need to be having sound discussions, not bouncing position papers. We should be discussing properly about products, migration and deployment and above all about our common vision. I would like my mandate to be characterised by good co-operation.'

Responding to suggestions that the two groups have slightly different perspectives, in that operators are looking for lower costs while suppliers want a competitive market where they can exploit their intellectual property, Wiebe says he 'wouldn't call it tension,

because in the end we have the same vision. We all want a well-functioning railway system, and to strive, if you want to put it more politically, towards the Single European Railway Area. That's the big political goal. In the end, the operators want to survive, and we want to survive.'

'We are all competing in a market. The operators want to offer good services, and we want to offer good products for them. There are always some differences and tensions, but that's why we should reflect more about the common goal,

*Wiebe is keen for the rail sector to be seen by younger people as an attractive and forward-looking place to work.*



how we can support each other, instead of focusing on the differences. I honestly believe we have more in common than we sometimes think.

‘In terms of deployment and migration, we might have some different views, but that’s where I say “let’s sit together and talk about it. Let’s be open about the costs. And let’s talk about the cost drivers.” I know the other side as well, so I could be arguing with myself. And I would say, let us discuss where the cost drivers are. Not blaming each other, because I think there is a little bit to give and take on both sides, and together we can be quite successful.’

### InnoTrans highlights

As usual, UNIFE is putting together a programme of activities for the InnoTrans trade fair this month, and Wiebe says it is going to be a ‘well-packed week’.

‘We have a couple of highlights, starting with the presentation of the 2024 World Rail Market Study, and the whole topic of global competitiveness. We will be talking a lot about ERTMS and ETCS deployment, as well as FRMCS, which is becoming a big issue for us. This is really in the spotlight at the level of the European institutions, in particular the Commission and the EU Agency for Railways.

**45.8**  
€bn

Reported  
annual  
turnover  
of UNIFE  
members

‘Then cybersecurity, that’s another hot topic. Our members are asking me to tackle a lot of things that are of great importance for them, particularly the small and medium enterprises. We will, of course, be talking about our certification scheme, IRIS.’

While the WRMS report is still under wraps, Wiebe confirms that ‘we are seeing some positive trends’. Some railways have benefited in the past few years from large-scale Covid recovery programmes, and suppliers had been concerned that spending might start to drop away as those are completed. This year’s report will look at future funding and investment ‘and what comes next’, in order to identify opportunities in that portion of the global market that is accessible to fair competition.

### International competition

Previous market studies have pointed to a decline in the accessibility of international markets, which now stands at around 61% of the global trade volume. UNIFE has long campaigned for free and fair trading rules, so should the association be doing more to strengthen the export market for European suppliers? ‘That is something we have been doing intensively for many years, with the help of the Commission’, Wiebe agrees.

‘One aspect is exporting Technical Specifications for Interoperability abroad. There is even a unit at the Agency doing that. Then we have the standards aspect. There is co-operation between the European standards bodies, such as CEN CENELEC and ETSI, and the International Standards Organisation, and that is very important. Nonetheless, there is still some work to be done at the international level, in particular with the engineering powers, and the capacities we should bring in here, preferably with the help of the European institutions.

‘Last but not least is OTIF, which for me is very important, because OTIF is ensuring the alignment of the legal frameworks in terms of interoperability and safety between the EU and non-EU railways. These are fields where we need to pay attention.

‘I’m committed to the OTIF work — very passionate about it. But for standardisation, I think we still need a discussion, and we still need more support to defend European interests at the international level.’

But how does that work when many of UNIFE’s larger members are effectively global players, with plants and technical centres of excellence around the world that are feeding ideas







Photo: Cmeberg / Shutterstock

and products back into Europe as much as exporting outwards?

‘That is actually where we need a sound standardisation framework,’ Wiebe explains. ‘Those discussions are carried out at ISO/IEC level. Yes, it is a feeding out and feeding back what the Europeans need. This has been a continuous plea by UNIFE. We need support and the backing at the international level of standardisation, because it can be very difficult if you send one person to these committee meetings, while the Chinese and other major players send five or 10 perfectly trained engineers. My message to Europe is really keep an eye on this. Let’s be prepared, and let’s defend our interests.’

## Elephant in the room

Asked if there is anything that the suppliers should be doing to encourage greater investment in rail, Wiebe suggests that it is all about delivering technically advanced products that improve the competitiveness and efficiency of the rail sector as cost-effectively as possible.

‘Coming back to our earlier discussion, that is linked to the dialogue between the rail operating community and the supply industry. I think there has been a lack of discussion about migration. Look at ERTMS. We have a very good target system, but we have never properly discussed how it should be deployed as part of the TEN-T programme. It’s not just a case of putting in more and more money. We need to discuss a sound migration path, and that must be linked to the financing and funding discussion. It’s the same for ETCS and FRMCS, or the other technologies we want to deploy.

‘It has always been my fear that at a certain point we might have to choose

between all these innovative solutions, and that’s what I really want to avoid. I do not want to come to a point where we have to choose between ERTMS, DAC or other TSI implementations — that would be really bad. We have to think holistically and see this as a whole picture. We need to discuss migration, and how we get there. And then we link this to the financing.

‘In this respect, I think we have a very good example in the European DAC Deployment Programme, where specifications, migration, funding and stakeholder involvement are being considered holistically in a project approach. I would like to see this as a blueprint for the bigger picture of deployment. We need to break down the silos, and I think that’s going to be a major challenge. Breaking down silos is something everybody talks about, and very few manage. But if we want to be successful, we absolutely need to do this exercise.’

So how does that sit with technical evolution and future research and development? UNIFE was heavily involved with establishing the EU-backed Shift2Rail programme and Wiebe explains that it is continuing to play a key role in the Europe’s Rail joint undertaking.

‘UNIFE has always been a big supporter of these large-scale research programmes, and as an association we play a quite important role in both the Innovation Pillar and the System Pillar of Europe’s Rail. Indeed, that was the idea of the System Pillar, to bring the representative bodies together to work out the specifications for the future railway and find, collectively, the target system. I’ve been involved (on the other side) from the very beginning.

‘It is quite a tough exercise, but I think it really will lead us to sound and

*Suppliers and operators in many countries are reporting a shortage of people with the necessary skills.*

good specifications. And here again, the System Pillar must have the discussion about the migration path. This is very, very important, because the System Pillar is about defining the parameters of both the target system and the migration path.

‘If we are given the chance to continue the JU concept as a follow up, we will be fully supportive — we have already started discussions about the future scope. I would definitely say that the JU has been a success.’

## Delivering affordability

‘Of course, we have to put some pressure on ERJU and on ourselves as suppliers. We have to deliver outcomes with a high level of technical readiness that are both implementable and affordable. In the end, that’s a win, win. It’s a give and take. Of course, we have to see where we can get the costs down. For me, it is a bigger picture. Affordability actually starts in the drafting, right through to the tender process, so it is not an isolated, tiny little thing.

‘As you know, I was in the procurement department on the other side; these tender specifications are essential, and they have to be sound. We should not, and the operators should not, reinvent the tender specifications again and again. If we really want to have better prices, we have to think about the industrialisation of the products, and now I’m talking about ERTMS again.

‘The way to get costs and prices down is to standardise, simplify, and deliver, based on the harmonisation of operational rules. Streamlining rail regulations and harmonising rules, in co-operation with member states, would end the “patchwork” of rail networks and create a truly unified SERA. It all sounds so simple, but we know it is actually so difficult. How can we get member states to agree to a harmonised approach, which is essential if we want to bring costs down, and roll out the technology to match the TEN-T timescales?’

Asked whether standardisation would hamper suppliers from capitalising on their product differentiation, Wiebe argues that need not be the case. ‘That’s why I like to talk about the functional requirements. We are not going to deliver all the same product in the end, because otherwise we don’t have a competition. But we should agree on the functional requirements, the basic set of functions, and that is what the System Pillar is developing, what we should really drive for.

‘But then, we need our colleagues from the rail operating community to stick to the harmonised functional

requirements, and not start redefining them, changing them, or putting some national specifications on top. No, no. If we really want to bring costs down, we must go for the industrialised approach.'

As for the emerging 'game changers' in the next evolution of the TSIs, Wiebe says that 'for ATO, as an example, we should be very careful about the target system. What do we really want to deliver? What is our final goal, how far can we go, and what is realistic in terms of migration? For me, this is exactly the same for ETCS, FRMCS or ATO. It should be functional specifications, where we have a basic set of requirements that everybody fulfils.'

'The TSIs are a functional description of the interoperable railway network. They do not tell you exactly what size the box should be or where to put the screws. That's what we need, because within this functional description, we still want to allow competition, as this keeps the market alive. I'm a big supporter of an overall technical framework, which allows the actors within these boundaries to take account of research and innovation, and be creative in terms of developing good products that are, of course, interoperable. So we are talking about interface management as well.'

**Recruitment and skills**

As railway technology continues to evolve, suppliers and operators in many countries are reporting a shortage of people with the necessary skills. 'That's going to be the biggest challenge, besides the technology developments, this shortage of skills', Wiebe agrees. 'We have to become one of the top employers, and that applies both for the supply industry as well as for the rail operating community.'

'I would go so far as to say it applies for me as Director General of UNIFE, because I'm competing here in Brussels



**'We really need to prioritise. If we get this right, I think we will make a big leap forward'**

*Enno Wiebe, Director General, UNIFE*



for the best staff available. It's a market here — when you have a call for candidates, you are really struggling. So you have to become a good employer. My vision is for UNIFE to become one of the top employers in the Brussels arena.

'But that requires change. You have change your attitudes, your ways of working. You must modernise, and that's a cultural challenge. I've been working in the safety domain for quite a while, and change is very difficult to implement. You have to convince people, you have to work hard on yourself. But I think that is what we need, as a rail sector. Otherwise, we will be pushed aside by others who are competing with us. And I'm not willing to be pushed aside, so that means we have to work hard.'

UNIFE has been one of the partners in the EU-backed STAFFER project, the Skill Training Alliance For the Future European Rail. This is now drawing to a conclusion, with its final conference scheduled for October 23.

Wiebe says the programme has already issued 'some very good recommendations. There were ones that were quite self-evident, that were coming through from a mid-point, which spoke to themselves. And then there's going to be a further element added to them in the final package, being put together by the hard-working team at the University of Genova, and all the other stakeholders working together. I think that there might be a

follow up, which we are going to discuss. But we should not talk about this for the sake of running an initiative — we need to focus on the results, and talk about implementing them.'

**Doing a few things well**

Looking ahead, Wiebe says UNIFE is focused on the political discussions around the next EU budget, the Multi-Annual Financial Framework. 'That's a big thing. I think that migration and deployment are something that we really need to focus on. To ensure that the rail sector has sufficient financial resources to make the system "fit for the future".'

'We really need to sit together to work this out. Have the necessary financing and funding, the necessary support as well, and a sound migration plan. It sounds so easy, but achieving these large scale investment and deployment projects within very tight deadlines is going to be a challenge.'

'Together with the other sector stakeholders, we said to the Commission at the beginning of this year "let us focus on a few essential issues or areas of activity, notably ERTMS and DAC, FRMCS, and the harmonisation of operational rules. Let's get this right, and then we can do all the other things in the next step.'" We really need to prioritise, and that was our message. If we get this right, I think we will make a big leap forward.'

**61%**

**of the global trade volume is made up of international markets, access to which has recently been in decline**

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