

Navigating the future of rail: ambition, innovation and talent

Enno Wiebe, Director General of UNIFE, spoke to Global Railway Review about the importance of supporting a positive outlook on digitalisation in rail with action.

THE European rail industry is currently experiencing a period of significant positive momentum, marked by a palpable sense of optimism and growing demand. Recent gatherings of industry members, such as those held in Warsaw on the 11th of June, have revealed a buoyant spirit and full order books, painting a promising picture for the sector's future.

This positive outlook is echoed by Enno, who reflects on his first year in office as a challenging yet ultimately rewarding experience. He described it as a "steep learning curve with some sleepless nights," but it was the perfect move for him, embracing new challenges after 25 years in the rail operating community.

"Despite prevailing positive sentiment and ambitious visions for digital transformation and modernisation in the rail industry, there's a crucial message that needs to be louder: the need for realism regarding financing and execution. High-level political messages, sometimes referred to as 'Sunday speeches', often paint a picture of a wonderful world, yet the grey reality on Monday requires a concrete migration plan for proper investment.

"There are many fantastic plans and ambitions, from high-speed master plans and ERTMS rollout to military mobility, but the fundamental question of 'Who is going to pay for this?' remains central. The industry needs continuous political support, stable investment and effective execution to ensure these visions translate into reality, rather than remaining mere dreams. The risk of losing momentum due to new topics emerging, as seen during global events like the war in Ukraine, underscores the necessity of sustained focus and support. The goal is to turn vision into a reality."

UNIFE'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Looking ahead, UNIFE is concentrating its efforts on several key areas to drive the industry forward, including budget allocation, high-speed project development and FRMCS.

"Getting the specifications for FRMCS back on track is vital, as it is a crucial part of the ERTMS rollout, currently facing significant delays. Focusing intensively on the European Train Management System (ERTMS) deployment is crucial for modernising the railway sector. This comes hand-in-hand with further investment in research and innovation by supporting the successor of Europe's Rail Joint Undertaking."



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Beyond these specific initiatives, there is a strong emphasis on digitalisation and the integration of advanced technologies. Artificial intelligence (AI) has great potential for accelerating various processes within the industry.

ROBOTICS AND DRONES IN RAIL

The growing role of robotics and drones, particularly for inspection purposes, is something to be excited about. Devices like robot dogs, capable of navigating all kinds of terrain for inspections, are amazing! Of course, there is the somewhat 'strange' or 'weird' feeling of encountering such 'creatures' of metal and sensors, there's a clear value to the industry, especially for dangerous jobs or inspections in challenging conditions.

Drones are also crucial for collecting comprehensive data via cameras and sensors, which is vital for a digitalised system, impacting areas from infrastructure to rail freight. This represents a 'vast field' for research and innovation.

ATTRACTING THE NEXT GENERATION

A significant challenge facing the rail industry is attracting new talent and adapting to the evolving expectations of the workforce. While initiatives like 'Women in Rail' and efforts towards gender equity are underway, finding new talent, especially in specialised areas like cyber-security, remains difficult due to intense competition from companies wanting to retain their personnel.

The priorities of potential recruits have shifted significantly. For the younger generation, factors beyond salary are often paramount:

- **Homeworking policy:** This is often the 'first question' in job interviews at UNIFE.
- **Environment:** An important consideration.
- **Work-life balance and wellbeing at work:** These are increasingly valued, indicating a shift from previous generations where salary was the primary concern.

The industry's image is another hurdle, Enno concedes. Railways are often regarded as rather old-fashioned, conservative and male-dominated, not generally perceived as open to women. Despite actual interest observed during open days, the industry needs to work on its perception, moving away from being seen as male dominated and highlighting the diverse range of jobs available, particularly in digitalisation and cyber-security, which have "nothing to do with the traditional railways." The observed disappearance of railways from mainstream media and toy stores also signifies a disconnect, meaning trains are not in children's mindset anymore, and thus not a dream-career like they might have been for previous generations, posing a challenge for future talent attraction. The industry must change »

public perception and open up to become a more attractive employer.

THE PATH FORWARD: DEPLOYMENT AND COMPETITIVENESS

For the industry to advance, the most critical element is 'deployment' of planned initiatives. This means accelerating initiatives like the ERTMS rollout and digital automatic coupling, especially with pioneer trains poised to begin. Continuous and real investments are imperative for maintaining momentum.

Furthermore, the competitiveness of the rail supply industry is a significant concern. While the industry is currently performing well and the market is strong, with 'happy faces' observed at general assemblies, there's a need to be aware of aggressive market entry strategies. Market access for EU rail supply companies globally is reportedly in decline, with many countries having stringent rules that limit access for European firms, while non-EU companies can often access the EU public project market more easily.



Enno Wiebe is the Director General of UNIFE.



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This imbalance, particularly where there is no access to 41% of the world market for EU companies, is unfair and unsustainable. Discussions are ongoing to address this disparity.

The rail industry is poised for growth and innovation, driven by ambitious plans and technological advancements. However, achieving these goals requires a pragmatic approach to financing, sustained political support, and a concerted effort to modernise its image and attract a diverse pool of talent by adapting to new workforce priorities. The focus remains firmly on accelerating deployment of key technologies and addressing global market access challenges to ensure a robust and competitive future for rail. 