

Guest Columnist

Neil Robertson
 Rail Supply Group Industry Skills
 Champion and Chief Executive at the
 National Skills Academy for Rail
rail@bauermedia.co.uk



Embrace digital technology

WHEN did you last hear someone say: "I wish I had more data reports to look at?"

No, me neither. But the digital revolution rages on, whether we want it or not. And to paraphrase a famous remark from an old revolutionary: you may not be interested in data, but the data is interested in you.

Despite the rush of digital technologies into all our lives, there is still an ingrained tendency in some sectors (and I am afraid rail is very much one of them) to underestimate the transformative impact that data-driven tech is having on the world of work.

According to the recent *Future of Jobs* report by the World Economic Forum, by 2025 the amount of time humans and machines spend on current tasks at work will be equal.

That trend is being driven by the huge efficiency savings that applied digital technology can deliver, coupled with dramatic improvements to customer experience. But despite the many advances rail has made over recent decades, especially on the operations side, our sector is still not benefiting from these opportunities nearly as much as it must do to compete in the coming years.

That said, I am delighted to see that the Government's *Build Back Better: our plan for growth* honours the existing industry sector deals - including the Rail Sector Deal, which the Government has asked the Rail Supply Group to deliver.

And skills is one of its top priorities.

The big challenge for the rail industry is adapting to change, no more so than with regards to investing in skills - and, importantly, digital skills. Many have built their career in rail, and we need to continue that legacy and attract new talent with exciting and dynamic roles.

In a report released earlier this year, entitled *Why Rail Needs to Embrace Digital Technology*, the National Skills Academy for Rail estimates that savings of at least £200 million and as much as £600m a year could be made in maintenance alone if the appropriate investment in new technologies and staff training is made in good time.

It won't be a small task. The rail maintenance workforce numbers about 72,000 and just about every job will need some sort of retraining or upskilling, but it can be done if we develop a rigorous enough approach to strategic workforce planning.

The competitive railway of the near future will have data specialists on every work crew in every sector. In many cases, this will mean retraining or upskilling, but it is also going to mean an influx of new recruits - new in every sense of the word.

We will be competing for this talent in a pool that is already hugely in demand and undersupplied. Waiting for young data analysts and other digital specialists to come to

us won't be enough. The sector needs to get proactive and do it now - offering apprenticeships, developing training pathways, and thinking hard about a working culture which is going to have to be attractive to a different kind of rail worker.

After the shock of COVID-19, the future of work looks more uncertain than it has for many years. Perhaps the only thing we can really be certain about is that it is going to be data-driven.

There are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about what the data-driven rail industry will look like. But we can't afford to wait and see, we have to make it happen. Because if we don't, we are letting a huge opportunity slip through our hands.

We are in a revolution, whether we like it or not. And to misquote another old revolutionary: you may interpret the world in all sorts of ways, but the point is to change it. ■

■ NSAR's report on *Why rail needs to embrace digital technology* was published in May 2021. The research uncovers key insights about productivity, digital technology and its impact on job roles.

Southeastern 465173 passes Grosvenor Road depot on January 15 2019 with a service from Greenhithe to London Victoria. NSAR estimates that some 72,000 rail maintenance staff will need retraining as part of the industry's drive towards greater digitisation. ALAMY.

