

Megan Holman discusses rail freight during the Covid-19 pandemic, the benefits on the economy and how her career started in the rail industry.

The world of rail FREIGHT

After studying law at university what first attracted you to the rail industry?

I kind of just fell into the industry and thought I will apply and see where this takes me, long story short, I got offered to go to the Network Rail assessment centre. I remember coming out of there and thinking this is right up my street and one of the main things that appealed to me was that I wasn't shoehorned on a particular career path. I could make my own decision based on the skills and knowledge I build up on the graduate scheme. In terms of the industry itself, at the time I had no understanding whatsoever which was a massive learning curve for me, but it worked out very well.

Tell Focus readers about your current role as Customer Manager at Network Rail and Freightliner, what does that entail?

I work for Network Rail as a Customer Manager looking after Freightliner and several other smaller freight accounts. This involves managing the commercial and customer relationships as well as being the first port of call within Network Rail for them to ask any queries. We also manage from a contractual perspective as well. It is quite a versatile role, I can be out one day in PPE with the freight operators, understanding their operations and how we, as Network Rail, can support rail freight growth. Alternatively, I can be in meetings discussing topics such as access rights, claims and any related current affair subjects. These include electricity charges, the decarbonisation agenda and most recently the rail strikes. I feel it is a really good job to be in because in a large organisation like Network Rail, it's a good reminder that all the work done and decisions you make inevitably impact the day-to-day users of the railway.

You spent most of your graduate scheme within the Systems Operation Function in placements such as Strategic Planning and HS2 integration, can you tell Focus readers what your favourite project to work on has been and why?

I know we have had the recent announcement regarding HS2, proving the industry certainly does not come without its challenges. Despite this, the HS2 integration team was an interesting and thought-provoking placement to be a part of. This was because I was involved in probably Europe's largest rail project and I was tasked with working on a wayfinding strategy between Birmingham New Street and the new HS2 Birmingham Curzon Street. This allowed me to look into how users will move between the two stations. You have thousands of people potentially going through Birmingham at every time



in the day. Therefore, it's about thinking how we can make that an efficient route going forward. I engaged with different stakeholders across the industry, worked with the council to understand their thoughts and I helped find solutions to streamline the process.

During Covid-19 passenger numbers dropped and freight services increased due to demand, how challenging was that period and how does it compare with the industry today?

It was definitely challenging, I joined Network Rail in March 2020 a few days before Lockdown started. I will say it was also exciting and one of the main reasons why I chose to stay in freight was seeing first-hand the potential we can have not just on the industry but also the wider economy. We probably had the most rail freight ever on the network and during Covid-19 we were able to use that space to continue moving key supplies. This was anything from PPE, medical supplies, keeping supermarket shelves stocked and transporting biomass to power our homes. I think before Covid-19, freight was often a second thought and sometimes forgotten about, so I feel the pandemic really helped underline the importance of rail freight and helped shift that perception.

As an advocate promoting the importance of rail freight in the economy what key messages would you share to raise awareness and increase growth within the industry?

There are many benefits that rail freight can offer, it's not just about delivering goods but also how it impacts the economy. For example, rail freight benefits £2.45 billion each year to the economy, mostly flowing out of London but also coming from the North as well. Rail freight is more beneficial to the environment than transporting via road, one single freight train can take around 76 lorries off the network, reducing congestion on roads and is more reliable in terms of speed as well. I think it's important to highlight that freight trains aren't dirty whose key role is to deliver coal, freight is so much more than that. It is trying to continue that

message going forward and accelerate the shift from road to rail.

Are you working on any projects now that you feel will restructure the industry in the future?

Something I'm currently working on with Freightliner is recasting their Mendip traffic flow to improve operations and performance Mendip traffic is the single largest freight contract we currently have on the network. It involves moving aggregates from terminals in London and the Southeast from quarries in Northern Somerset. It is used for various construction projects such as housing, improving roads and boosting the local economy and has involved extensive work from various different stakeholders across the industry.

As a role model for women and young individuals within the industry, what advice would you give to upcoming talent who wish to get involved?

The biggest thing is don't let the stigma put you off. When I told my family about getting the job at Network Rail, they were under the impression I would be constantly working on the tracks and looking at the maintenance side of things or doing announcements at stations, both are equally important jobs; it was the fact those thoughts were the first thing that came to their mind. I want to really highlight that there is so many different routes you can take, some examples include HR, finance, project management, communications, timetabling. There are loads of opportunities waiting for you in different departments of the rail industry. I think shifting that perception to thinking you are going to be on tracks every day is important when attracting new talent into the industry and is a big learning curve that we can do as an industry to promote the next generation into a career with us. ❌



▲ Megan Holman, Customer Manager, Network rail and Freightliner