



The impact of efficiency savings on Network Rail staff, performance and safety

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Introduction

This study arises from a request from the rail trade unions through the TUC to conduct two focus groups which would explore the impact of efficiency savings on Network Rail staff, with a particular focus on performance and on safety. The analysis here presents our findings and recommendations. The study was small scale and conducted over a relatively short period of time, however, we believe that its core findings would be replicated even in a larger study.

Executive summary

- Staffing shortages had led to the promotion of a culture of putting off until tomorrow the jobs that could not be done today, simply because the resources to carry them out were not available.
- As a consequence of budgetary reductions multiple roles were now expected of many staff. Participants suggested that this impacted on the ability of staff to deliver an efficient and safe service. Supervisors now held responsibility for safety, budgets and targets and there was a very strongly held view that, at workplace level, safety (regardless of the published statements of senior management on the rail network) had become secondary to the need to comply with the more concrete demands of budgets and targets.
- With fewer staff available there was a greater likelihood of individuals being required to work outside of their normal territory of operation or to have a wider geographical range of operation. The lack of resources also meant that there was insufficient time for familiarisation.
- There was concern that the situation was deteriorating as a result of skilled staff departures to better-paid and more secure work and examples were provided.
- Participants asserted that budgetary reductions were affecting safety standards and there was a generally shared view that there would be another major incident before long, that it was not 'if' but 'when'. Participants were clear that serious incidents were as a result of cumulative errors and decisions even though they were rarely investigated using these criteria.
- There is a culture of long working hours and of maintenance staff, in particular, now having to travel long distances to jobs.
- There has been an increase in the under-reporting of incidents involving safety concerns and the view was widely held among participants that reporting had not led to changes and that non-reporting had now entered into the culture of the rail industry. Indeed participants expressed the view that the lives of railway workers were simply viewed as more disposable, so that the deaths or injuries of rail workers did not merit attention.
- A focus on more maintenance at weekends had a consequent negative impact on the personal and family lives of staff. There was also a strongly held view that wages had declined in relation to those in comparable industries and that overtime was thus used as a way to enhance falling levels of pay. But this fostered a culture of not reporting poor or unsafe practices and examples were provided of staff who had made safety complaints believing that they had then been excluded from the allocation of overtime.
- Decision-making had been devolved to front line staff, such as engineers who had responsibility for both budgets and for safety and sometimes these were incompatible, with a view that financial considerations were over-ruling safety requirements.
- Participants referred to an on-going skills crisis, given the age profile of many sections of Network Rail. There was also a progression channel in which the absence of significant financial rewards in exchange for much higher levels of responsibility had led to reluctance among some staff to take up managerial or supervisory roles.
- Apprenticeship training at Network Rail was generally viewed as good, but the employment conditions on completion meant that a considerable number of trained personnel left on completion of their apprenticeship.
- Participants (including those who themselves worked for contractor firms) spoke of a greater reliance on contractors. A main problem voiced in relation to the use of contractors was in respect of the allocation of staff and the movement of workers (often over very great distances) to perform particular tasks.

- In both focus groups the issue of zero hours' contracts was raised in relation to contractors. Participants asserted that workers on zero hours' contracts were doing safety-critical work. They stated that such workers also felt pushed into accepting work even when they knew that they were not fit to carry it out (for example, due to tiredness or fatigue) as they were concerned that if they did not do this they might be excluded from future offers of work.

Recommendations

- The industry needs to move away from its attempts to confine much of the track maintenance to weekends.
- The industry needs to re-consider the allocation of jobs on the basis of their multi-tasking responsibilities. In particular there is a need to separate responsibility for budgets from those of safety.
- To avoid the likelihood of a major safety incident the industry needs to start addressing more closely, at workplace level, the long-term impact of budgetary and staff reductions on the future safety of the railways.
- The industry needs to conduct a detailed review that takes account of the age profile of its existing staff and which also looks at the reasons for staff movement into other employment, to understand what the workforce of the future will consist of, particularly in terms of its skills' profile.
- The issue of zero hours' contracts is without doubt a controversial one, but it is not a solution for an industry that needs to have a high regard for safety. The industry needs, as a matter of urgency, to reach agreements with contractors that they no longer offer such contracts to their staff.
- The industry needs to take urgent steps to start to reverse any culture that includes the non-reporting of incidents involving safety, no matter how inconsequential these appear. A commitment to delivering a safe railway system needs more than just a voiced opinion from the most senior level of management. Instead it needs to be accompanied with a range of measures that really demonstrate that at the heart of the industry, it is safety that is the prime motivator.
- The industry and/or the rail unions should consider commissioning of a larger study aimed at obtaining testimony in confidence from a wider layer of rail staff to demonstrate whether this small-scale study reflects a wider picture.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the research involved the organisation of two focus groups, both held in London, facilitated by the TUC, involving RMT, TSSA and Unite members within Network Rail (NR) as well as from major NR contractors. The aim of the Action for Rail focus groups was to give all of the participants the opportunity to voice their views on the discussion points as set out in Appendix A.

A focus group is an interactive form of data gathering that allows all of its members to respond to a set area of discussion in a more natural way than would be obtained through one-to-one interviews. Interacting with one another means that the opinions expressed and the resulting analysis of the data is more nuanced than might be the case were opinions sought from each individual separately. The dynamics of the group itself means that there is potential for its members to both expand their views but also to develop them through interaction with others.

It was proposed that the focus group discussions be semi-structured in order to cover the key areas of inquiry identified above but also to allow further commentary from participants. The group participants were allowed to steer the discussion in the directions that seemed most relevant to them, although in the course of the discussion, we aimed to cover all of the areas highlighted in the

discussion points shown in Appendix A. Prompts were used where necessary but in general the discussion flowed openly and it was rarely necessary to refer to the prompts.

Each of the focus groups were of around two hours' duration. Focus group participants were selected by the participating trade unions with the aim of ensuring a diverse range of staff, including Network Rail and contactor staff, as well as the national officer of each trade union. There were 11 participants in total. The aim had been to involve around 15-16 participants but this did not prove possible within the time constraints imposed on the project. The participants were:

- Full-time trade union officials (two) – one from RMT and one from TSSA
- Directly employed Network Rail staff (five)
- Employed by contractors (four)
- All were trade union representatives in their place of work
- Two were female and nine were male
- Nine were members of RMT; two were members of TSSA; one was a member of Unite the Union.

Limits of the study

The study was very small scale and conducted over a relatively short period of time. Within the limits of such a study we believe that the findings would be replicated even in a larger study. The concerns that participants voiced were particularly focused on health and safety. This in part might have reflected the fact that a majority were health and safety representatives in their workplaces but also chimes more generally with the concerns of workers gleaned from other studies where restructuring has taken place in sectors where safety is a major factor.

Operating in a context of resource reductions

In both focus groups there was extensive discussion around reductions in spending on the railways and the impact these had on existing service provision. The reductions were described as 'arbitrary'; as being solely for budgetary reasons and as being carried out with unnecessary speed. There was concern that budgetary cuts had resulted in a lowering of safety standards, in staffing shortages and generally in the promotion of a culture of putting off until tomorrow the jobs that could not be done today, simply because the resources to carry them out were not available:

'So that they say we can't achieve that at the moment so we're going to put that into the backlog and we'll deal with that as a separate issue. Then when they can't deal with the backlog, they reprioritise work. So they give it less of a priority. (Focus group 1)

Participants spoke of numbers of workers in gangs being reduced, with individuals being responsible for a wider area of safety, and of jobs needing to be done in a shorter amount of time:

'The time that you was given to do a job which, say you had a 30 length job to renew, they'd give you 52 hours to do it. And now they only give you 26 to do the same job in, and at the same time you're supposed to do it safely, it's impossible' (Focus group 1).

There was a view that those who made the decisions about cutting jobs were 'too far removed' to have anything negative that might happen as a consequence traced back to them.

In both focus groups there was discussion on the multiple roles now expected of many staff, as a consequence of such reductions and of the impossibility of meeting the requirements of these jobs, as one focus group participant noted: 'I think that's one of the worries with the cutbacks is that you then are forcing people to do two or three roles because they're trying to save money so they're trying to get people to be multi-skilled' and in the view of this and other participants, the effect was to lower the standard of work done with a potential impact on overall safety. There was reference to 'a move towards fault-centred maintenance' which had resulted in a reduction in regular equipment inspections, so that assessments were being made on the basis of a likelihood of equipment failure rather than on the need to inspect regularly, to ensure that it was properly functioning. With fewer staff available there was a greater likelihood of individuals being required to work outside of their normal territory of operations or to have a wider geographical range of operation and the lack of resources also meant that there was insufficient time for familiarisation. This in turn led to managers attempting to give guidance simply by providing staff with area maps, but as one participant stated, seeing a map and understanding where the curves in railway tracks occur, when it is the middle of the night and the only illumination is a torch, is something entirely different:

'Certain managers will try and get round that familiarisation of the track by saying there's the map of the section appendix, off you go. And that's just a straight line, it doesn't tell you about curves, it doesn't tell youturn up pitch black and these guys will tell you better than this; middle of the night, 3 o'clock in the morning, pitch black out there. You don't often know if it's an up or down and if you've got an adjacent line opening and you know one's live and one's open' (Focus group 1)

An example cited was in the case of an unfinished welding job which had resulted in two welders being transported from Doncaster to Hitchin (a journey of more than 100 miles) because none were available locally, and which ended in a tragedy when their van collided with a lorry, killing both of them. Incidents such as these are not logged as being a direct result of budgetary cuts, but in the view of the focus group participants there was a direct causal link between the two. There was no belief that the situation might improve, indeed even before the implementation of CP5, participants in both focus groups spoke of reductions being made in staffing levels prior to those that would be required under CP5. We were told that there had already been a 15 per cent reduction in headcount cut across the management staff, in advance of CP5. Participants working for one large contractor stated that they had been told that there would be further reductions in staffing levels of 15 per cent, regardless of whether or not their employer won the contract for CP5. Furthermore there was uncertainty among the participants who were working for contractors as to what their terms and conditions would be under the new contracts. This feeling that things might

get even worse, participants remarked, had led to a seepage of staff, particularly among the contractors, with workers resigning from their existing jobs to work in higher profile and better resourced work, such as on Crossrail, where pay was said to be better and where staff did not feel themselves squeezed in the same way. What participants felt most lacking was any measure of stability, as there were so many instances of restructuring and nothing was 'allowed to bed in':

'Certainly the reduction in staff has been an absolute constant and that's sheer numbers, obviously in frontline grades but across all grades which means it's pressure across the whole organisation in every aspect of what's going on.' (Focus group 2)

As the next section will demonstrate, participants were clear that budgetary reductions were affecting safety standards and that 'things are building up, they're just penny pinching all the time when they keep telling us safety first'. Given the serious picture that they were painting, we questioned both focus groups as to why these issues had not been raised more. For a participant in Focus group 2 the reason was related to general apathy, 'people have been talking about these problems and lack of resources or pressures for so long that the apathylike well nobody cares, and all we can see is announcing more and more savings'. In an industry where safety depends on a workforce that is alert to averting dangers, apathy is a very dangerous condition.

Budgetary reductions were claimed to have affected not just the frontline staff but also the inspection services, meaning that the railways were less likely to be subjected to inspection and when incidents occurred there was likely to be more delay and a less intensive response:

'All the investigation teams have been shrunk, which again is part of the cutbacks, so instead of having four or five national investigators, they've got down to a team of three, although the number of incidents and things that they need to be investigating is still the same. ... the effects of all the cuts is you've got less people who do more work and if you're doing more work, you're going to miss something or your natural ability is you will put off the minor stuff and concentrate on what you think is the major. And that extends across the management team, and the contractors. And when they're asking contractors to go in and do work, they've got a mind on the purse strings before actually if they don't do this, how unsafe is it?' (Focus group 2)

A fall in health and safety standards

In both focus groups concerns were raised time and again about the impact of the changes that they were experiencing on health and safety, with concerns about the rising number of 'near misses'. Participants gave statements such as 'we seem to be going backwards in realms of safety', 'we'll have a major incident very soon because all these little cuts will come together very soon'; and 'it's a matter of time rather than anything else'; 'it's just a matter of when. I hope I'm not on shift'; 'there's no slack in the system whatsoever. And you can't run something where things go wrong without some slack'. Staff members were sometimes working long hours, were called out on emergencies or had to travel long distances to get to jobs, all of which were claimed to be putting safety at risk. There was also a view expressed in both focus groups that the multiple responsibilities required, particularly of supervisors, to hold responsibility for safety, budgets and targets meant that safety became secondary to the need to meet the more concrete demands of budget and target. The point was made that whilst workers were continuously being told that safety is everyone's responsibility 'it can only be everyone's responsibility if they do listen when things are raised. And that's a cultural thing'.

The researchers questioned this concern in view of the fact that there had been no reported serious incidents and asked whether this concern for safety might mainly be a way of expressing opposition to budgetary reductions. The overwhelming response was that this was not the case. Participants reported that accidents were starting to go up but that unless there were fatalities they were often hardly reported, so that in the public consciousness nothing had changed for the worst. As one participant put it:

'What we don't want to do, we don't wait to say I told you so written in blood, this is actually what we don't want to go for. We don't want that to happen, as I said before, we're railmen, we want to run a safe, happy railway.' (Focus group 2)

Rail workers too were said to be less likely to report safety concerns, simply because when they had in the past nothing had changed. There was a view that whilst there was talk of safety being a 'number 1' priority the reality was different, as one participant, showing real anger, commented:

'We're not fools and we're not idiots, we can work this one out that safety is our number one priority but just come work in them dusty conditions that you can't see your hand in front of your face. Well it isn't even a laughing matter, it's serious, it's a disgrace. And then, they've got the audacity to say well we're doing all we can, wear this dust mask and we're doing all we can. It's an absolute ... it's a travesty.' (Focus group 1)

Indeed there was a view that in any case, the lives of railway workers were simply more disposable. The deaths or injuries of rail workers did not merit attention:

'They might be in the local news but the person working on the track gets hit by a train does not get anywhere near the publicity that somebody travelling on the train gets. ... A member of the public gets hit on a level crossing, it's big news. A guy gets bowled over in the middle of a Saturday night from a possession¹ – "track worker injured": one line.' (Focus group 2)

Furthermore, just because a major accident had not occurred was itself not an indication of a safe system, for, as one participant expressed it, 'it doesn't happen overnight, it doesn't fall overnight, it happens in six months, a year, maybe a number of years later' or as another suggested, it was a matter of when not if:

'You're getting very close to the next big one because if you look at the statistics of when these things happen, you find out that there were various cuts, there were things not done, edges shaved off.' (Focus group 1)

Another participant spoke of an eventual 'Swiss cheese moment' a slow chipping away until eventually a big disaster happens. Their view of a disaster being imminent was informed by the

¹ The term 'possession' is used to indicate that maintenance contractors have taken possession of the track so that no trains are running or the service is reduced.

nature of how work was being undertaken, where just a moment's lack of concentration could result in an incident, as had occurred at Stevenage, where a worker just momentarily leant on a fence which gave way - 'fortunately they survived but a piece of fencing collapsed, just too risky for me. It's about time we took a step back and said let's stop mixing trains with men'. This comment came in the course of a discussion on the changes which had taken place in track maintenance, which resulted in workers working alongside moving trains. Generally participants felt that nothing was learnt from previous incidents, unless the incidents were major. Inspection teams (as noted in the previous section) had been reduced in number and investigations now took longer than in the past:

'And the other thing that we don't seem to do, and one of the ten point plans of Network Rail, is learning from incidents. Now it takes so long to get these incidents investigated and sent out that they don't always look and so while they're waiting for that report to be written, there's no push out of there straight away to tell the guys stop doing this.'
(Focus group 1)

Not all of the comments by participants were negative; there was a view that initiatives such as the 'track safety alliance'² might be effective in halting unsafe practices. Participants also acknowledged that in some cases safety had been improved and there was a strong consensus, emerging particularly from senior management in the railways, that safety should not be compromised:

'Very, very senior management are trying to put out the safety message and I think they're doing quite a good job of putting out the safety message at a very high level. But the people in the middle of the sandwich, from section manager up, are saying yes I hear what you're saying but I can't deliver what you want.' (Focus group 2)

However, even here there was not much optimism. The view was that 'lots of people at the top of Network Rail, know exactly what the problem is but the only solution is to have more people to do that work' and that a culture of cutting corners and of responding to budgetary targets was difficult to overcome. As one participant noted, it 'takes twice as long to remove a culture and it does take resources to give people that flexibility and that isn't happening at the moment. So despite all the good vibes, it can't imbed itself really'. The consequences were that individuals were scapegoated whenever an incident did arise, so that the response was that it was just a problem of them being 'the wrong people in the job' resulting in everything just becoming 'very negative'.

² The Track Safety Alliance (TSA) is an industry wide group formed in 2011 to allow a number of companies across the industry to develop and share best practice, see: <http://www.tracksafetyalliance.co.uk/>.

The impact of change on staff and on the railway network

In discussing different elements of work on Network Rail, participants repeatedly alleged that increasing amounts of work were being undertaken by staff who were not familiar with the locality in which they were working. This was identified as a change from past practices, which were described as incorporating more notions of co-operation between different teams of workers so that 'there was a lot more time for people who would actually help people from other departments. There was an awful lot of cooperation because there wasn't that pressure' even though it was recognised that there had always been some budgetary constraints, these operated outside the pressures to complete jobs, which participants spoke of as now occurring. Changes in working practices also accounted for the problem of lack of familiarity with work areas:

'One of the biggest things on the railway at that time was knowing your local area. It was a big thing in the building industry; if you didn't know your local area; don't give a monkeys.' (Focus group 1)

'You've also got people driving to different places of work instead of work being local, and being familiar; so all that local knowledge has dropped.' (Focus group 1)

Participants in both focus groups referred to reductions in the size of teams or of individuals having multiple responsibilities so that 'one person has got to carry out a job where two or three years ago there would be four or five people doing it, but now it's one person'. The participants also expressed concern of the pace of change being relentless, so that 'they never give anything new any time to bed down and look at it and say did we get that right'. These views were expressed by directly employed and contractor staff:

'Well I can only look atwhen we joined, when we came from xx contractor for example, we had 60 men in the gangs and so over the last four years, I think that's reduced by half. And we don't replace, the only people we replace is the techs, the supervisors and the foremen So we allow people to move into position but we haven't filled any positions in four years. Our numbers have not grown, they've only declined.' (Focus group 1)

'There's short term cost-cutting operations – there is a lot of short termism around and particularly certainly extremely over the last six months or so.' (Focus group 2)

There was particular reference to the more complex roles now undertaken by supervisors (the people who had to 'get jobs done'), but whose targets and reviews are dependent on delivering on performance. As one participant commented, 'if I want to do anything, I've got to try and put a paper in to say it's cost neutral. So I can't actually improve anything, I can only shift stuff about'.

There was also a lack of 'congregational oversight' with no one with an overview of all the projects that might be being carried out during the same period. The result was that each tier of management made an assessment of their own level of risk, measured against what they found acceptable. Another change was in the movement of work into weekends involving what one participant referred to as 'weekend warriors'. This had consequences both on the personal and family lives of staff (see below) and on pushing possessions into the weekend. There was a view that these changes had led to a weakening of safety standards and that decision-making had been devolved to front line staff, such as engineers, who then had responsibility for both budgets and safety and sometimes these were incompatible, with the result that the need to keep within budgets trumped requirements for safety. The quote below is reproduced in full as it demonstrates the changes that staff identified and the potential risks that they might promote:

'But also they've also weakened down the protection arrangements, so when you used to have possessions you would have it properly planned and everything, engineer possessions, T3³s. They're now weakening that down because that doesn't give you

³ T3 possession (or "absolute possession") prevents trains from entering a section of railway line in order to protect engineering work, with arrangements at both ends to control the entry and exit of engineering trains. This disrupts normal train services.

the access to the track as quick, so they make them at what they call line blockages which basically only then has a signaller protecting the people out on the ground. And they don't always put any secondary protection, so we used to always have a secondary protection, so belt and braces that the guys on the ground knew. What you've now got is eight people on the ground, with the only protection being in the signal box and yet that signaller as I said before, could have seven of these blocks. But the reason they've done it is because of the time constraints from the train companies to get access to the track. So it almost seems like Network Rail, because of financial constraints, is actually led by the TOCs (Train Operating Companies). So you then minimise the access to the track for the guys, which means you then force the guys to try and do the job quicker and they want it to be done quicker because they've got the restriction of how much they can pay for these things. So like you say, you're then forcing more adjacent line openings so you can keep trains bombing past and if you look at something like the Watford signal box, you've got something like eight incidents of trains going through possessions just because of the workload on the main line out of Euston. And then they're hitting 80 miles an hour or so and you haven't got a chance if you see one of them come round the corner.' (Focus group 1)

Participants also referred to an increased focus on targets which were often driven by the cost of overruns⁴, as different parts of the rail network came under different budgets and companies claimed from one another:

'Because they're squeezing the time and access to the tracks and because then they've got pressures from the top and the restrictions of how they're met, the problem is the cost of overruns or what happens to the train service is not actually on the same balance book. So Network Rail doesn't produce a balance book, well this is how much it costs us and this is actually the savings etc. So you have all these ... train operators and you get the big fine that's coming now because we're not running to things on time.' (Focus group 1)

'Managing by attendance'⁵ was also highlighted as promoting a situation where staff felt that they had no alternative but to come into work even when they were unwell, thus potentially spreading germs and incapacitating others.

⁴ A reference to when work overruns the agreed timetable.

⁵ A term used to describe a management system which is based on staff attendance only rather than on staff performance.

Skills, qualifications and training

Participants in the focus groups came from different age groups but there was a strong view that the railways were heading for a crisis in skills, as older workers left the industry, 'so looking at the age profile of the departments that I work in, they're all 52 to 58, they're looking at taking 'brass' and their severance and there's no one behind us'. There was also a particular problem identified in relation to the section manager grade, with a strongly argued view that skilled personnel were reluctant to take up these posts due to their relatively poor additional remuneration, the increasing amount of unsocial hours' working they involved and the high level of responsibility the postholders had in determining how they would balance budgets against safety risks. It was reported in both focus groups that younger workers were finding opportunities with other employers once their training on Network Rail had been completed:

'Some find something else or move on and then within the couple of years of coming out of their time, we've probably lost another 10-15 per cent and then five years on from when they finish their apprenticeship, we might have 20 or 30 per cent of what we started with.' (Focus group 2)

Participants were generally positive about the apprenticeship training that Network Rail provided to its staff but stated that young people on completion were as likely to leave as to stay and other employers, including contractors who worked for Network Rail, were ready to poach staff once they had been trained. Thus in the future there was likely to be a massive skills shortage at least in its engineering sections.

There was also a concern that other forms of training were less successful and that some workers were not properly trained. It was claimed that some of those working on the ground, as lookouts for example, were put on the job too soon, before they really could have developed a knowledge of the track. Training was said to have been 'watered down and devalued' so that it basically amounted to no more than competences and was often tested through multiple choice responses, where even those who did not know the right answer would have a 25 per cent chance of guessing it. Participants also spoke of a need for retraining for longer serving staff, who might have high levels of competencies but whose skills when it came to the use of new technologies, were limited, 'you've got a lot of people with a lot of service who would need to go back to retrain on a number of things to be better and up to date with what they were' (Focus group 1).

Contractors and the use of zero hours contracts

The structure of today's railway service is very different from that in the pre-privatisation era before the 1980s and some of the focus group participants (although only a minority) could trace their employment in the railways back to that period. The participants who could thus do so were able to draw some comparisons between then and now, sometimes seeing the current situation as less favourable to that of the past. It is always necessary to take account of such reflections whilst at the same time noting that the past is often reinterpreted in a different light from the reality of the present. One area, however, where it was clear that there had been a significant change in the working of the railways, was in the use of contractors. Some of the focus group participants themselves were working for contractors while others worked with contractor staff on a daily basis. Their views on how the contracting system operated were noteworthy. A main problem voiced, in relation to the use of contractors, was with respect to the allocation of staff and the movement of workers to perform particular tasks. A number of examples were provided, of contracting staff travelling long distances to undertake a job and arriving late at night in an area that they did not know:

'I would hate to be a contractor [] they come from all over the country, they do not know the area. And you're coming on a Saturday night, which is primarily when a lot of work is done, pitch dark and they've just got a basic map. ... But of course with a contractor, you've got actually no idea and he's coming from 200 miles away and he's been stuck in a hotel all week. He doesn't know the area.

And what is worse than that, quite often if he's doing say a barrier job, so he'll drive a few hundred miles, do the barrier job. Put his block out, go and sleep in his van, and he's on the next day during the day, trying to – so the contractors don't – the two different departments don't know if he's working 24 hours. There's no way of telling or knowing.' (Focus group 2)

The consequences of this method of working were felt both by the contracting staff themselves, but also by the directly employed staff who found that they were often left 'picking up the pieces' after the contracting team had moved on. In some cases there was also concern that contractor staff might actually be working for more than one employer at a time and that there was no way of checking on this. Participants also felt that the system of contracting allowed Network Rail to avoid its responsibility for the railway infrastructure simply by passing these on to the contractor with little inspection to ensure that jobs were properly carried out:

'I think sometimes there is because, if Network Rail can say right, we can pass that contract out to the contractors, and they take responsibility for that job, we tell them what they've got to know, we use the standards. That's literally oh yeah, I've actually got to make sure, they've got to do it for me. But they don't really check if they do do it that way.'it's like when we had possessionsthey'll send somebody in to get it done, and resolved, they won't actually enquire how they got it resolved, they don't care so long ason time and the trains run.' (Focus group 1)

In both focus groups the issue of zero hours' contracts was raised in relation to contractors. Participants stated that workers on zero hours' contracts were doing safety critical work but in a context where 'you get that done else you'll not be working tomorrow night scenario'. Zero hours' contracts were also pushing workers into taking work even when they believed that they were not fit to carry it out, for example, due to tiredness or fatigue. It was asserted that such workers felt that they had to do this or risk being excluded from future offers of work. Participants described these cases as follows - 'zero hours' men so they just turn up and hope there's work, which then puts pressure on us because they're saying can we take this because we're down in another location'. There was recognition that Network Rail was trying to address the issue of zero hours' contracts, but the lack of adequate controls on contractors made this difficult, as well as problematic for all staff, both contractor and directly employed:

'You've got some contractors, although Network Rail are trying to finally address the issue on zero hours' contracts, where predominantly they are working sometimes [a]

huge amount of hours because they daren't say no because if they do they're not going to get the work. ' (Focus group 2)

Participants argued that there were alternatives to this form of working and that programmes of work could be drawn up more consistently, however, it would mean also a move away from trying to confine much of the track maintenance to weekends and this would in turn impact on when possessions took place and on train services. The current system of penalties for late operation of services directly affected the ability of the railways to provide a standard of maintenance which was less destructive of its staff:

'Because what we're saying is that if we had other ways round of getting rid of zero hours, is if we had a more fluent consistent work programme. But because as we mentioned earlier, xx want to run the trains 24/7 and we're not getting mid-week possessions anymore.' (Focus group 1)

The human life consequences

Those who work on or for Network Rail experience the same work/life pressures as do other workers but there was a feeling among the focus group participants that the way that the job was changing was having profound consequences on individuals, beyond their work, into their private lives. There were two issues; a fall in the real value of wages in comparison to what was available elsewhere than in Network Rail and a detrimental effect on private life. As one participant put it:

'I want to see my kids between four o'clock and eight o'clock when they go to bed And [at the] weekend, and they want to go to Alton Towers, Dad can't take them because he's going to be working.36 hours or 35 hours, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, they don't 'give a monkey's about our social life.' (Focus group 1)

Participants spoke of wages going down 'from being a good wage to an average one' and that this was encouraging trained workers to look elsewhere for better paid jobs. There was a greater reliance on overtime but this was said to work in two ways. First, people worked overtime even when they were tired because turning it down might impact on future offers of overtime. Second, there was a view that overtime was being allocated on the basis of compliance, so the more compliant a worker was, the more like it was that they would be offered overtime. Claims that overtime was being reduced were challenged:

'I've done nearly 35 years and every year I've been told they're going to cut down on overtime, it's never happened. And every year I'm earning more on overtime than my basic rate.' (Focus group 1)

Some departments are worse than others. It's not in every single department. But it tends to be in '– the departments that have a lot of overtime whereas people have set their lives up for that overtime so your mortgage payments or whatever you're doing. So that's a real hard hitter because if you need say three shifts a period, your manager knows that you always ask for overtime, they know what's going on. And they use that against you, oh well, go and do that job for us, I'll sort this shift out later on in the week.' (Focus group 2)

It was not the case that these views came from a group who were opposed to change. Indeed they recognised that there should be changes and they spoke positively about some technical developments. These were not individuals merely representing a longing for a past remembered as 'better'. They were acutely aware that the context in which they were working had changed; that the values that had once been paramount were less relevant in today's context; and that there was not necessarily the same sense of loyalty to the job, so that the concept of the railways as a 'job for life' was not current. However as one participant noted:

It's a different world that we live in now and not just the railway but society has changed and I think it's a lot more looking after yourself as opposed to looking after your colleagues. And as I say, I think that's a social thing as much as a railway thing. But it is, the environment that you work [in] now and the relationships you have with colleagues was so different then as it is now. And as I alluded to earlier, and a lot of that is that now you've got your performance, you've got your budgets; most people now do not get a national pay rise it's based on their performance review. There is so much pressure to conform, not just to perform, to deliver, but to conform, otherwise you get tarred with a bad brush and because you're then fighting for pay rises and everything else. Yes, there are still some people who really love the railway but there's a lot of people who've retired over the last four or five years who lived for the railway and who could not wait to get out. I've known train drivers, I know one in particular, that cried on his last day going back years because he didn't want to finish. People now cry because they're happy to leave!' (Focus group 2)

Is there an alternative future?

The focus group discussions took place in the context of a move from CP4 to CP5 and for most participants this provided an opportunity to reflect on what had happened under CP4 and what hopes they might have for CP5. The issue of multi-tasking was one that was raised. This was an area where it was felt that change could be introduced for the better, that there was a viable alternative provided that this involved the separation of the tasks of budgetary control, production priorities and safety. One participant spoke of the need to re-professionalise the rail industry:

'I think it's about time we need to move the opposite way. We talked about this earlier, is that I think we should now have – we're in a world where we're getting, we have professionals who install the track, engineers. Let's have professionals who carry out the safety. Let's make them people dedicated to just carrying out safety. So I don't care whether a lookout knows how to use a shovel, what I want a lookout to do is protect me from them trains. I don't want a COSS⁶ to know how to fit an IBJ. I want him to keep me and my work group safe and be strong enough to challenge on the safety matters.' (Focus group 1)

There was also discussion over the need for even small gains to improve the morale of staff, to make staff feel that the industry has their concerns at the heart; or to increase the number of apprenticeships, particularly from the contractors:

'So it might only be something silly like we talked about PPE⁷. It might beto turn round and say right, every subcontractor in this country who works must wear this PPE on track renewals for example. They must have the same standard as what maintenance get, end of story. That's a quick win because he's got that power to force that.' (Focus group 1)

'It would be nice to see CP5 have some sort of commitment to bringing on, like we were talking about apprentices, I know Babcock have got, they've brought a few apprentices on, is it 10, 12 this year?' (Focus group 1)

Conclusion

Without evidence of positive change for the future, the risk to the industry is that an increasingly older-aged workforce will leave the industry, without being replaced by a new generation of qualified skilled workers who want to work in the industry for the rewards which it offers, and who feel that there is a sufficient degree of stability to encourage them to stay.

The study has evidenced a number of changes within the industry and has shown that these have and will continue to impact on health and safety on the railways. In particular it has emphasised that there has been a move away from the allocation of staff based on a working knowledge of their area of operation. This lack of local knowledge means that staff members are unable to assess the dangers presented from moving trains, particularly at night, in locations where bends and other obstacles, obstruct their vision.

The study has also highlighted the increasing precariousness of employment within sections of the rail network. In particular the allocation of work to staff on zero hours' contracts has resulted in the promotion of a workforce where the need to work overcomes any concerns over safety, in the context of long and unplanned working hours and unacceptable distances between home and location of work.

The study also suggests that there is a dislocation between the expressed concern for safety as presented by the most senior levels of management within Network Rail and a reality where safety may be secondary to meeting financial and performance targets.

⁶ A COSS is a 'controller of site safety'.

⁷ PPE is personal protective equipment.

Finally there is a perception that worker voice is ignored within Network Rail and a view that the safety of its staff and those of its contractors' staff are secondary to the combined interest in lowering costs and passenger 'satisfaction'.

Whilst we cannot make large scale generalisations from a small study such as this one, we believe that the points raised do resonate with the opinions of a wide body of staff within the industry who care about its future and who increasingly feel that there is a disaster waiting to happen, not if, but when.

Recommendations

- The industry needs to move away from its attempts to confine much of the track maintenance to weekends.
- The industry needs to re-consider the allocation of jobs on the basis of their multi-tasking responsibilities. In particular there is a need to separate responsibility for budgets from those of safety.
- To avoid the likelihood of a major safety incident the industry needs to start addressing more closely, at workplace level, the long-term impact of budgetary and staff reductions on the future safety of the railways.
- The industry needs to conduct a detailed review that takes account of the age profile of its existing staff and which also looks at the reasons for staff movement into other employment, to understand what the workforce of the future will consist of, particularly in terms of its skills' profile.
- The issue of zero hours' contracts is without doubt a controversial one, but it is not a solution for an industry that needs to have a high regard for safety. The industry needs, as a matter of urgency, to reach agreements with contractors that they no longer offer such contracts to their staff.
- The industry needs to take urgent steps to start to reverse any culture that includes the non-reporting of incidents involving safety, no matter how inconsequential these appear. A commitment to delivering a safe railway system needs more than just a voiced opinion from the most senior level of management. Instead it needs to be accompanied by a range of measures that really demonstrate that at the heart of the industry, it is safety that is the prime motivator.
- The industry and/or the rail unions should consider commissioning of a larger study aimed at obtaining testimony in confidence from a wider layer of rail staff to demonstrate whether this small-scale study reflects a wider picture.

Appendix A: Focus group discussion points

Focus group areas of discussion

A focus group is an interactive form of data gathering that allows all of its members to respond to a set area of discussion in a more natural way than would be obtained through one-to-one interviews. Interacting with one another means that the opinions expressed and the resulting analysis of the data is more nuanced than might be the case were opinions sought from each individual separately. The dynamics of the group itself means that there is potential for its members to both expand their views but also to develop them through interaction with others. The aim of the Action for Rail focus groups will be to give all of its members the opportunity to voice their views on the five areas of question below:

Introductory remarks to attendees:

This focus group has been convened to look at the experiences of the Network Rail workforce and other workers providing services under contract to Network Rail. We are looking to see what your experience has been working for or with Network Rail over recent years and what changes you have seen to working practices.

Network Rail was charged with finding cost reductions of around 20 per cent in Control Period 4 (2009-2014) and has been asked to find an additional 20 per cent of savings in Control Period 5 (2014-2019). There are a number of ways that these savings can be found but there will clearly be impacts on the workforce.

For example, in Control Period 4 Network Rail are estimating a headcount reduction of 1,000 in signalling and control, and over 4,000 in maintenance, equating to a 17 per cent reduction in staff numbers. For Control Period 5, a headcount reduction of 4,400 in signalling and control and 1,250 in maintenance is estimated over the next five years.

In this context we would like to ask you some questions about the changes you have seen in your working practices and conditions and how you expect that to develop in coming years.

Let's start by saying who you are, what role you play and whether you are directly employed by Network Rail, or if you are employed by a contractor working under contract to Network Rail.

Let's start by talking about changes you have observed in the last 5 years (Control Period 4).

Questions:

Part 1: Control Period 4

Looking at your work over the last 5 years (Control Period 4, 2009 – 2014), let's talk generally about the changes you have observed as a result of the cost reductions Network Rail is making.

(If needed, researchers can use these areas to prompt discussion)

- a. Workloads and work scheduling
- b. Availability of full time staff
- c. Availability of qualified staff
- d. Availability of suitable materials and tools
- e. Time allowed for the completion of key tasks
- f. Team working
- g. Communication with management

- h. Relationships between teams with Network Rail
 - i. Relationships between Network Rail staff and contractors
 - j. Relationships between Network Rail staff and Train Operating Company staff
 - k. Relationships between rail workers and rail passengers
 - l. Provision of training and development
2. In terms of staff in your area, have there been any increases in the use of agency staff or those on different kinds of contracts and if so what these have meant for workers and for service delivery?
 3. To what extent have the changes you have experienced in your own work had a positive or negative impact on safety for (a) rail workers and (b) rail passengers?
 4. To what extent have the changes experienced in your own work had an impact on the ability of (a) Network Rail to manage railway infrastructure to the highest standard and (b) train and freight operators to run a good and reliable service?
 5. Have you experienced any significant changes to the structure and management of your area of Network Rail and what impact has it had on the areas previously discussed?

Part 2: Control Period 5

1. Bearing in mind the changes you have identified over recent years, how do you feel about Network Rail's plans to find a further 20 per cent of cost savings?
2. What impact do you think that Network Rail's proposed savings in the next five year period (Control Period 5, 2014 – 2019) will have on your working conditions, operations and team working?

(If needed – researchers can use these prompts)

- a. Workloads and work scheduling
 - b. Availability of full time staff
 - c. Availability of qualified staff
 - d. Availability of suitable materials and tools
 - e. Time allowed for the completion of key tasks
 - f. Team working
 - g. Communication with management
 - h. Relationships between teams with NR
 - i. Relationships between Network Rail staff and contractors
 - j. Relationships between Network Rail staff and Train Operating Company staff
 - k. Relationships between rail workers and rail passengers
 - l. Provision of training and development
3. To what extent have the changes you have experienced in your own work had a positive or negative impact on safety for (a) rail workers and (b) rail passengers?
 4. To what extent have the changes experienced in your work had an impact on the ability of (a) Network Rail to manage railway infrastructure to the highest standard and (b) train and freight operators to run a good and reliable service?
 5. Have you experienced any significant changes to the structure and management of your area of Network Rail and what impact has it had in the areas previously discussed?

Part 3: Concluding general questions

1. Do you think there has been a change in the culture of working on the railways in recent years? What impacts has this had?
2. How have relationships between Network Rail and Train Operating Companies changed in recent years? What have been the impacts of these changes?

Appendix B: Background

This report contains our analysis of two focus group discussions around the implementation of CP4 and CP5. The context for the report is in the following statement produced by Action for Rail:

- According to the *Rail Value for Money Study* “in order to meet its efficiency targets, NR expects to reduce staff numbers over Control Period 4 (CP4) by 6,300. Much of the reduction could come from the maintenance function, with further reductions from investment projects, and from operations staff (signallers and others). This equates to a 17% reduction in staff numbers and is predicted to deliver a corresponding 21% reduction in staff costs.”
- The report states that, by the beginning of CP5, NR would have reduced its signalling staff from 8,600 to 7,600 and its maintenance staff from 18,000 to 14,000. It also stated that significant overhead reductions could be made through reducing NR’s support, management and administration.
- Network Rail’s strategic business plan for England and Wales CP5 (2014 – 2019) commits to further job losses as part of its attempt to make efficiency savings.
- It states that NR’s new signalling operation strategy “will reduce the frontline operations workforce of 5,600 to less than 1,500 by migrating operational management from over 800 disparate locations to 14 modern operating centres. Migration will be staggered so the levels of redundancies will be kept to a minimum through staff retirements, leavers and utilisation of staff at other locations where possible“
- In maintenance, headcount is projected to reduce over CP5 by around 1,050, which is equivalent to a reduction of 8 per cent in total workforce. Track direct employees have the greatest absolute reduction of around 800.
- The strategic business plan for Scotland indicates a reduction of signalling and control staff from 500 to <200 and a 200 reduction in headcount in maintenance.

There was a predicted Network Rail headcount reduction CP4 and CP5 as set out in the table below

Period	Signalling & Control	Maintenance
CP4	1000	4000
CP5	4400	1250
Total	5400	6250