

National Apprenticeship Week & safety



everyone
home safe
every day

Dear all,

It seemed fitting to acknowledge National Apprentice Week, 10-16 February, especially since I began my journey in the railway industry through an apprenticeship back in 1996. I want to express my support for apprenticeship programmes and the benefits they provide for both individuals and businesses like ours.

Recently, someone asked me why I didn't attend university. It made me realise that this question still carries some stigma for me, even if I thought I had moved on from those feelings. That moment reminded me of the embarrassment and shame I sometimes feel about entering the workforce through a different path.

The truth is, my home life was challenging when I finished school, and I simply couldn't afford to go to university, so I chose to get a job instead.

What made a difference for me were the people who took the time to help me. I'm truly grateful to them. Starting out on the railway at 17 can be daunting, but it's thanks to those who willingly shared their knowledge and kindness that I am where I am today and it's important to pay that support forward.

Now, as I think about all this, I want to connect it to safety. Let me explain.

Some of the earliest and most important safety lessons I learned at that time are still in the forefront of my mind today:

- When working on the mainline red zone, with trains running at 125mph, you need to be careful.
- Points and crossings are high-risk areas, so be careful with stretcher bars, and battery contacts.
- Be cautious around 650 volts electricity.



Rob Cairns,
Regional Managing Director

- At level crossings, pay attention to road traffic instead of just rail traffic.
- When setting up track circuits in damp conditions, be aware that they might not work properly dry and this could lead to trains not being detected.

These lessons are firmly planted in my memory, not just because they were significant, but because they dwelled on very nuanced and specific risks. In some way, they must have been either the things that my elders of the time assumed might catch me out, or indeed the things that had maybe caught them out. Who really knows?

However, focusing too much on the dangers of high-speed trains might in some way give the impression that slower trains are less risky. The same goes for the 650 volts; it might lead people to think that anything below that is in some way safe.

In today's world, where lawsuits are common, we often avoid discussing specific risks. This can create issues, as it leads people to consider every possible danger in the round, instead of focusing on the few that could cause serious harm. This is a challenge we all face in safety leadership.

Understanding risks in detail helps us see their specific characteristics and potential consequences. By thinking about them carefully, we might also start to see other risks in a more structured way. Everyone perceives risk differently, which makes safety a complicated issue. We are all unique, and we can't approach every situation the same way.

The main point of this week's message is to encourage you to think about how we identify and communicate risks. The way we describe the likelihood of a risk is so incredibly different from how we explain the consequences of harm of a risk. It's essential to create an emotional connection with those facing these risks, so the necessary process of brain connectivity can begin.

Safety is what you make of it, according to what you are willing to own for yourself. It isn't a remote concept that visits us from time to time, rather it is what we make of, and how we embrace, whatever lay right in front of us.

I often reminisce about the people who supported me during my apprenticeship. They weren't asked to help, but they felt a sense of duty to support those just starting in the organisation. Their kindness and decency is a lasting memory of true local leadership, and I'm committed to paying that forward for future generations.

If any of this resonates with you feel free to [reply to me directly](#).

Stay safe,
Rob