

Improving safety – a two-way relationship



**everyone
home safe
every day**

Dear all,

This week, I write to you all having returned from 2.5 weeks leave. It was thoroughly nice to wind down and focus on some non-work things. For me, that involved catching up with a few people – a luxury that rarely now appears to afford itself during the usual routine of work and travel. I wanted to share a story of three people – my close friend, my next door neighbour, and the godparent to my daughters. All three work for Network Rail as part of welding teams for maintenance, albeit in different DUs. Each one of them has more than 30 years' service, and their experiences always provide a fascinating insight for me in terms of the perspective they give.



**Rob Cairns,
Regional Managing Director**

These are the perspectives which stuck with me.

First, they unanimously talk of the transformational impact the Versaflo™ air-fed breathing masks have had. What stays in my mind about their comments are the “absolutely brilliant” description of this safety development, coupled with stories of how the legacy masks would humidify so drastically that removal was the only treatment, and often that would coincide with inhaling the manganese fumes – which on a bad day could cause several days of illness. Finally, that the 3M™ particle filter replacement is exactly the same as that used in your Shark® vacuum cleaner, which a) I really doubt and b) if it was, it's still not that interesting a story TBH.

Secondly, unloading the 47kg propane bottles was unimaginably difficult. Unquestionably a two-person lift, the locality on the van prevents two people being able to access the part of the compartment where it would be strapped in. The advent of tail-lifts on the most recent 7-tonne vans has significantly lightened the load for the safe removal of grinding equipment and rail trolley – but often the van can still be many tens of yards from the railway, meaning the manual handling challenge can still apply.

Lastly, the tallest of the three is very tall and would lay his legs over the rails to limit the leaning to access the crucible. He talks about debilitating back problems, and has undergone hours of surgery. The less lofty of the three speak similarly about the damage to joints from kneeling on ballast, and how the knee pads to this day are inferior.

Notably, none of them talk about their own perceived exposure to the type of road traffic incidents which have blighted the safety records for welders over the last decade, often understood to be linked with extended shift patterns and driving. They all describe the combination of the telematics system and the immense benefit of working for NR, and hence not having to travel the profound distances that we know contract welders often do.

The point of my message however is not to share the specifics of these individual issues, but rather the fact that my three friends all talk about it being the job not of them, but of management, to progress and shape the technologies and work environments for the better. On so many levels – and in so many ways – I think they are right, and I really feel this burden. However, I simply don't know enough about welding and grinding to even know where to start, and professing to understand would be an insult to the workforce who do understand this environment. What I'm coming round to, in a long-winded way, is the two-way relationship associated with evolving and sophisticating our safety environment.

One of the things I can often be guilty of is failing to see why they don't take their own steps and use their own initiative to make the very changes that we, the organisation, would like them to take. After all, we seek modernisation and reform. However, for me to assume and think they feel they have the mandate or levers to make such changes, is perhaps a further instance of me not really understanding enough about the realities for our teams on the front lines.

I therefore make a very direct link between the need to lead and advance safety, and transforming the relationship we have with our front line workforce within our maintenance and operations teams. The reputation of the leadership is that we are distant and remote, and progress can get stuck in the 'middle' – be that red tape, or otherwise. I want to start this journey by letting you know this is the culture I want for Wales & Western and you are welcome and free to support me, and challenge me, on any area on this.

Stay safe

Rob

This update is provided by the Wales and Western Communications team. For any queries, please contact walesandwesterncomms@networkrail.co.uk



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