Facing challenges the Irish way!

Jim Meade
CEO, Irish Rail

In February 2020 as stories from Wuhan, China started to emerge, Jim Meade CEO of Irish Rail sat at his desk feeling that this was going to be a bigger problem than most people were imagining. As he thinks back, he has no doubt that his background ‘growing up in rail’ helped him and his team to prepare for this emergency.

Jim started his career in 1979 as an apprentice fitter in the fleet. Eighteen years later he was head of fleet. He moved to operations in 2003, progressively taking on bigger and more challenging roles. In 2013 when Irish Rail split the organisation into to two separate entities: Railway Undertaking and Infrastructure, Jim became the Director of Railway Undertaking. The team he led had in-depth knowledge of all rail operations - fleet with passenger and freight, and also ops. As Director, he was responsible for all these elements, as Ireland maintained a fully integrated railway.

As Chief Executive since 2018, he has been working to keep to his holistic vision of effective rail strategy for Ireland. From May 2018 to February 2020 the focus was on growth for the railway. The company vision, “The strive for 75 by 25”, aimed to achieve 75 million passenger journeys by 2025 from a level of just over 50 million in 2019 and it looked like they were on target to achieve it. Then the news stories about the pandemic started filtering through…

Early on, Jim set up a Covid response team taking key people out of the day job to run dynamic risk assessment and start planning for a range of different scenarios that might arise.

The team started by looking at key control centres early on and created bubbles to reduce contact with others, making sure they could stay safe. “We isolated our shifts and changed our thinking about spare capacity so we could be more flexible. We asked our flexible shifts to stay at home and be ready to come in, but not come in unless it was necessary. We recalled people who were overseas and tried to make sure everything was in place,” says Jim.

Long before isolating and self-quarantines were requested by the government, Jim asked one employee returning from holiday to self-isolate for 14 days just in case. It turned out that Jim’s gut was right again, as the employee was the first positive COVID-19 test for Irish Rail. Having employees isolate was helpful in minimising the number of cases among staff and the business set up its own contact tracing app, ‘safe trace’ to make sure they had quick access to contacts.

Effective communication was also key to their approach. Jim wanted to make sure as many channels as possible were open to keep everyone informed and gain feedback on plans. There were weekly calls for 200 managers across the business and uniquely, key Trade Union representatives were also part of this call. “We also held daily conference calls with other public transport providers,” because as Jim says, “this had to be a team effort.”

This early action paid dividends, as it kept things moving smoothly. “Throughout, our focus was on keeping our people safe and healthy and so in turn could keep the public safe and the service operating. Prior to Covid we always kept the public in mind, but we wanted them to know they could rely on us. Our approach has worked as we have had only 20 confirmed cases to date from a workforce of 4100 and way below the national averages”.

‘The daily conference calls with other parts of the transport network were also key to successful pandemic management. “We spoke daily as one team - Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann and Luas (Dublin’s light rail operator) - to ensure all companies were providing same advice and support for the travelling public.”

The pandemic obviously affected the number of passengers travelling with Irish Rail. At one point they were down to 6% of usual passenger numbers, which meant the team needed to look to control costs by reducing train size and reducing train schedules appropriately. Now passenger numbers are starting to build back up to approximately 50%, the company is working with the government during this second lockdown to meet the 25% restriction mandated, but demonstrate the safety of their services to ultimately keep passenger levels at about 50%.

“From a pandemic perspective, we keep focused, we keep persevering, and we are proud to do it,” says Jim. “Our staff response has been phenomenal. Many of our front-line staff are students of the IRO and that training has definitely helped them feel enabled to deal with this crisis.”

Brexit planning made our Covid response better

In so many ways, the pandemic has proved how flexible Irish Rail can be. Ironically, the company’s preparations for Brexit were a useful warm-up for the pandemic. The 2016 Brexit result made it clear that there would have to be changes because trains cross the border, back and forth every day. There were several different plans modelling a range of scenarios all designed to keep connected with the north. But the eventual delay in Brexit has allowed the company to have in place all the certification required for trains and drivers to continue as now which means from day one, everything will run as it should.

Looking forward to a bright future

Exciting times lie ahead for Irish Rail. Rosslare Europort is part of the Irish Rail family through its historic links from Dublin to London. There are currently four sailings a day to the UK and six sailings a week to Roscoff and Cherbourg. As Brexit moves forward, they are anticipating these sailings to Europe increasing because shipping companies will be able to avoid the ‘land bridge’ to Ireland, meaning they will no longer have to wait at Dover.

From a climate action perspective, the team is working with the government to reduce their carbon footprint. They have launched ‘DART+’ – a 6.5 billion-euro project that will triple the size of their electrified network in Dublin and double its capacity.

They are also looking to improve services to the west coast cities of Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, which will play a big part in government plans for “Balanced Regional Development” around Ireland and will result in a much improved public transport offering in the regional cities.

“it is an exciting opportunity,” says Jim, “as we can improve that service within our current footprint, moving to electrification over time because our goal is to electrify the entire network in Ireland. Initially, this will mean 600 new electric vehicles and we are not intending to buy any more diesel trains. We know that hybrids may be one option to explore in transition but ultimately we want green arteries of transport.”

Jim sums up his feelings on recent events and how Irish Rail has responded, “This past year has really reinforced the team ethic here at Irish Rail. Our teams have worked incredibly well together. We work on trust, my team keeps delivering and I am grateful for all their efforts. We are connected and we help each other deliver.”
Reuniting the Railway Tribes

Dr Piers Connor
Principal Consultant of PRC Rail Consulting Ltd

Piers Connor looks at the current realities facing the railway industry and suggests what should develop in our Covid 19 and climate-changing world with the much needed reform of railway governance.

In 1964, Bob Dylan released a song, “The Times They Are a-Changin’”. Back then, the song became an anthem for the social and political upheavals which came after the assassination of the American President John Kennedy in November 1963 and the beginning of the American involvement in the Vietnam war in November 1965. Today, it could become an anthem for the post Covid-19, post Williams world that we have to consider for the railway industry and it will certainly become an anthem for the changes that will have to come in the next few years. In looking at what the changes might be and how they will affect us, we might take the opportunity to see what can be done to reform the railway industry and to reuniting what we could describe as the many railway ‘tribes’ that exist today.

Tribes, you might ask. Tribes? Well, in the last 25 years, the railway business in Britain has become tribal. Since the privatisation of the once nationalised British Rail organisation, which began in earnest in 1994, the railway has devolved into a series of commercially driven tribes. Each of the current 28 train operating companies represents a tribe, as do each of the freight operating companies, whilst a huge range of subcontractors, looking after wide variety of infrastructure systems and areas, forms another group of tribes. Many of them have distinctive colours and totems to distinguish one from another. These tribes all scramble to eke out a living from the vast land that we know as Network Rail. And we should not forget to include the tribes of stakeholders - passengers, freight customers, shareholders, pension fund administrators and the government.

To some extent, the railway industry has always been tribal. There are civil engineers and permanent way engineers, operators and maintainers, signalling and communications engineers, finance and commercial officers, publicists and human resources, safety guardians and administrators, to name but a few. They all represent a tribe of one sort or another. But they also all form part of a railway nation which we recognise as the railway system. The model of the railway system is where we must look to, if we are to reunite the tribes that make up the railway industry.

Separation

It is widely accepted that, since privatisation was started in the mid-1990s, the separation of the management of train operations from the management of the infrastructure upon which the trains run was the biggest single mistake of the process. The co-operation and co-ordination that was essential to provide an effective railway service was immediately lost. Coupled with this was the growing idea that government could claw back money from franchise operators by encouraging them into over optimistic financial and growth predictions. It drove some companies into abandoning their franchises and others into withdrawing from the industry and refusing to bid for new franchises.

These mistakes have gradually pushed much of the railway business back into national ownership and it is time that we recognised this formally andWilliams seems to be proposing this is the next step. It is obvious from recent news that train operations franchising has been abandoned, in line with Williams’ advice. Covid-19 and the subsequent collapse in passenger traffic and the revenue it generated has now presented an opportunity to place the railway totally under one system of management, operating independently but guided by the strategic direction of the government.

Public Participation

We should not forget that railways are a public service. It is widely accepted that, since privatisation was started in the mid-1990s, the separation of the management of train operations from the management of the infrastructure upon which the trains run was the biggest single mistake of the process. The co-operation and co-ordination that was essential to provide an effective railway service was immediately lost. Coupled with this was the growing idea that government should claw back money from franchise operators by encouraging them into over optimistic financial and growth predictions. It drove some companies into abandoning their franchises and others into withdrawing from the industry and refusing to bid for new franchises.

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Reunification

It has already started. Following the collapse of fare revenues and the need for high levels of government funding to keep the railways operating, franchise operators have now become management contractors, paid by the government to run the passenger services for a small fee - less than they were making as franchise holders, if they were making anything at all.

Now we need to see train operations and infrastructure reunited under one management system to match the reality of the railway itself and one system. We need to reunite the tribes under one guiding mind, perhaps with Network Rail overseeing train operating management contracts and the government allowing it to work from an arm’s length strategic remit. The remit needs to be simple; de-carbonise, provide accessibility for all, simplify fares and make safety and reliability part of the culture for all parts of the system. However it’s done, this is now a golden opportunity to reunite the railway tribes and provide our customers with a unified system for rail travel.

“Since the privatisation of the once nationalised British Rail organisation, which began in earnest in 1994, the railway has devolved into a series of commercially driven tribes. Each of the current 28 train operating companies represents a tribe, as do each of the freight operating companies, whilst a huge range of subcontractors, looking after wide variety of infrastructure systems and areas, forms another group of tribes.”
Coronavirus, Trafford Park Line and shifting priorities: Metrolink in 2020

Danny Vaughan
Head of Metrolink

Danny Vaughan, Head of Metrolink explains how the March 2020 opening of the new £350m Trafford Park Line (TPL) was the final piece of a £2bn decade-long expansion programme, which has seen us treble in size.

With six new tram stops, the new line offers sustainable transport links to some of Greater Manchester’s busiest employment zones and visitor destinations, including Manchester United’s Old Trafford stadium, Imperial War Museum North and Intu Trafford Centre. It also runs through Trafford Park, Europe’s largest trading estate and home to more than 1,200 businesses employing over 35,000 people.

To keep Greater Manchester moving now and in the future the city-region has a comprehensive strategy setting out our plans and ambitions for an accessible, sustainable and resilient transport network.

Transport for Greater Manchester

Transport for Greater Manchester is the largest transport authority outside of London and is responsible for delivering Greater Manchester’s transport strategy and policies set by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).
ROC on inductions!

Back in January Tim McCarthy, People Development Manager at Govia Thameslink Railway (GTR) approached IRO to put together a tailored induction programme for new starters at Three Bridges Rail Operating Centre (ROC).

The programme needed to offer a structured introduction for newcomers to Three Bridges ROC, as well as a dedicated continuous professional development (CPD) pathway into the rail industry as part of their new, virtual onboarding programme. And so, the ROC New Starter Pathways Programme was born.

Before the programme had the chance to get started however, the country went into lockdown and induction was last thing on anyone’s mind. With a clear idea of the desired outcomes for GTR, the IRO Industry Engagement Team was able to use time productively and cocreate the bespoke training and learning experience with Tim in double quick time.

The starting point for everyone joining the innovative programme is completion of bespoke online business research exercises designed to build company knowledge and a thorough understanding of how GTR delivers services to customers. Supported by their line managers and a suite of tailored materials, all new starters are encouraged to approach different teams in each area of the business. This helps them to build their own understanding whilst developing their interpersonal and networking skills in the process.

“The focus is on making learning relevant, gaining a broad knowledge of how the whole business operates and to promote synergistic working, so we’re avoiding silos from the start,” says Tim, who has pioneered the programme for GTR.

To complement the GTR business-specific component, all new starters are automatically enrolled on IRO’s ‘Introduction to Rail Online’ and ‘Rail Pro: The 12 System Elements of Rail’, two highly interactive online experiences that introduce them to the Professional Operators Development (POD) framework and guide them through the twelve sections of learning that span the full professional context of railway operators. It’s an accessible way of starting out on the CPD journey for anyone new to the industry, or those senior operatives wanting to supplement their learning, and will continue to provide support well beyond the initial induction period.

How has this programme been received?

Tim McCarthy of GTR commented, “GTR and Network Rail are proud to be a part of this industry-leading initiative that makes a firm commitment to all new starters. We’re delighted that they are receiving world-class, bespoke training endorsed by a leading international railway professional body. We are extremely grateful to the IRO for working with us to develop this bespoke railway programme, the first of its kind.”

“The results speak for themselves,” said Danny Stafford, IRO’s Industry Engagement Operations Manager. “Overall feedback has been extremely positive from both the company and their new starters who have come on this journey with us. The bespoke nature of the content, coupled with our popular online courses has worked exceptionally well under difficult circumstances and we’re excited to roll-out similar programmes across the industry.”

IRO welcomes corporate member: Mercury3 Consult

Mercury3 Consult was established in November 2017 by Trevor Marshall, Ian Watson and Alan Beattie - three friends with long-standing careers in project management and the rail industry.

Recognising that every project is unique and a ‘one size fits all’ approach, was one which was all too often applied, they spotted an opportunity to do things differently and the consultancy was born.

In a comparatively short space of time the business has grown substantially into a team with deep subject matter knowledge and significant project experience in a range of specialist areas for the rail sector – modernisation and heritage. Experience includes railway operations integral to the delivery of technology and infrastructure projects, digital railway, railway signalling renewals, business change and interface management. The team provides flexible expertise on an individual basis; groups collaborating with project stakeholders; and teams to deliver whole projects or assist interim management.

So what attracted the business to become corporate members of IRO?

“We think there is good synergy,” says Trevor Marshall, Mercury3’s Operations Director. “We see a team of highly experienced operations consultants looking to maintain and develop our own skills through the IRO.

In addition, the academic courses and development programmes that IRO provides will help the graduates and modern apprentices, coming through on our new Operations Consultant Programme, to receive a structured training package. That means we can continue to develop good quality people, where experience is underpinned by professional accreditation.”

The Mercury3 team is also keen to explore how they might develop experience opportunities for other IRO members. “We’re used to translating the railway operations environment into the world of projects and vice versa,” says Trevor. “Although we’re a small team, we’d be happy to open our doors and share our experience with others.”

Railway Industry Innovation Awards 2020 - Innovation in Passenger Experience Award

IRO was delighted to sponsor the Innovation in Passenger Experience category in this year’s Railway Innovation Awards which took place in a lavish online ceremony on Friday 23rd October.

A new platform developed by Govia Thameslink Railway to accelerate refunds to customers in hours rather than days or weeks. Congratulations to LNER for their Let’s Eat - At Your Seat award! Let’s Eat was an industry first online food and drink in-seat app ordering service from LNER available to customers in both Standard and First Class.

Let’s Eat - At Your Seat: an industry first online food and drink in-seat app ordering service from LNER available to customers in both Standard and First Class.

Please search for Railway Innovation Awards on the railway’s social media channels to see how to vote for your favourite innovation in railway, and to find out more about LNER’s Let’s Eat - At Your Seat, which was awarded the overall winner and commended by the judges for the extra convenience it brought passengers with the added benefit of improving social distancing measures on the train.

Follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter to join our growing online community of railway industry professionals. Find out about upcoming events, industry news and more.
Academic Programmes

Academic Programme Launch 2020

Adam Fenton
IRO Learning and Development Manager

On 3rd October, IRO was delighted to join forces once again with our academic partner Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) to welcome the 2020 cohort of students onto our Railway Operations Management academic programme.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this year’s launch took place online – a quite different experience to that of previous launches. Over 150 students were able to meet their new classmates virtually and there were opportunities for IRO staff and tutors and GCU staff to introduce themselves to the new cohort.

Graham Craig, a Network Operations Manager with Network Rail, who joined the Degrees programme this year felt this launch worked well in the adapted format. “It was informative and allowed all the students to see who was on the programme and what experience/background we all have. I feel this was a real success.”

2020 also sees the launch of our new academic programme, which takes a systems approach to rail operation learning. I am looking forward to studying Maintaining Business Resilience whilst Managing Change” said Graham commenting on which of the new modules he was most looking forward to tackling. “We all have to manage change within our teams and area of the business, but sometimes we overlook business resilience. I look forward to enhancing my knowledge on this and the new modules he was most forward to studying.

The tutorials for the first modules on each level of the programme also took place on the day, marking the official start. We would like to extend a very warm welcome to all our new students and look forward to helping guide them through their learning journey.

IRO Scholarships

Each year IRO offers a range of scholarships and awards to students applying for places on IRO academic programmes. It is hoped that the scheme helps to widen access to professional qualifications across the industry by supporting individuals with some funding for their chosen programme. This year Nishad Pandit was awarded a scholarship as part of his application for the BSc in Railway Operations Management.

London Underground employee Nishad had recently completed his Diploma in Railway Operations Management and decided to continue his studies to degree level. As part of the application, Nishad applied for the IRO Scholarship to partially fund his studies, eventually becoming one of the successful applicants. Nishad explained how the scholarship awarded to him will be beneficial.

“Doing a railway related degree has always been an aspiration I wanted to achieve. Funding for my degree has been made easier with the assistance of this scholarship.”

“I am one of several students who benefit from IRO’s scholarship scheme each year. The scheme is open to anyone joining the academic programme and aims to play an important role in allowing more individuals across the industry to access our academic programmes” said Adam Fenton, IRO Learning and Development Manager.

For further information about the Academic courses we offer

To view all our academic courses, please visit https://www.railwayoperators.co.uk/learning-development/academic-courses/

Why join the IRO academic programme? Just ask our current students!

Jackie Scott-Walker
Network Rail

“I was very lucky to join the IRO programme as I have a railway background and I think the programme has given me a lot of knowledge and skills that I needed to move into a different role within the railway industry.”

Graham Craig
Network Operations Manager

“Applying for the 2020 Academic programme as I have been a railway operator for 21 years, achieving many in house qualifications and competencies along the way. The IRO academic programme allows me to achieve an academic qualification in Railway Operations Management and to further myself within the industry.”

Follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter to join our growing online community of rail industry professionals. Find out about upcoming events, industry news and more.
Orfsted Monitoring Visit

When IRO began delivering their popular apprenticeship programmes in September 2018, they knew to expect a visit from Ofsted sometime before September 2020.

This is because all organisations in England that provide education and training for apprentices are subject to Ofsted inspections — checking that the learning being delivered is of a high standard for students enrolled on the programmes. The results of these inspections and visits are then published online.

All new providers receive a monitoring visit within their first 2 years of delivery. This was when inspectors spent 2 days with the organisation, ahead of a full inspection which will take place within the next year.

A recent Monitoring Visit from Ofsted took place in February this year. The team received the customary two weeks notice of the visit which, as with all monitoring visits, would use the Quality Improvement Plan and Self Assessment Report submitted to Ofsted ahead of their arrival, as a base to assess IRO’s progress in three key areas:

1. Leadership
   Progress leaders and managers have made to ensure that they meet all the requirements of successful apprenticeship provision

2. The quality & outcomes of training
   Progress leaders and managers have made to ensure that apprentices receive high-quality training that leads to positive outcomes

3. Safeguarding
   Progress leaders and managers have made in ensuring that safeguarding arrangements are effective.

The Ofsted team were keen to talk with IRO CEO, Fiona Tordoff and the instructors and administrators who make up the Apprenticeships team. They also spent a large proportion of time talking to apprentices enrolled on the programmes.

“The monitoring visit didn’t feel like an inspection,” says Fiona, “It was a very supportive, process, with Ofsted giving us good tips and advice that will help us with our quality improvement journey. All the time they were trying to work through the impact our programme delivery had on our apprentices, and where there is room for improvement. They really gave us some great advice to improve our processes.”

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They have found ways to ensure studies remain on track and have managed to maintain and in some cases improved, the quality and flexibility of the learning experience on offer.

This team currently manages three industry leading apprenticeship programmes for rail professionals: Level 3 Team Leader / Supervisor programmes, Level 6 Operations / Departmental Manager programme and the highly popular Passenger Transport Operations Managers programme at Level 4.

At the end of the visit, all the team members were very impressed with how the IRO team had made sure that apprentices are able to work through the impact our programme delivery had on our apprentices, and where there is room for improvement. They really gave us some great advice to improve our processes.

What do members of our Board have to say about this exciting new offering?

Stewart Langridge of IRO

Rail Academy will further enhance the IRO’s ability to provide structured, balanced and relevant rail operations learning programmes. Whether this is information at a corporate level or an individual looking to improve their own knowledge, continuous improvement is at the heart of what the IRO sets out to provide to the Rail Industry. The IRO’s long history of industry engagement means it is ideally suited to provide these essential learning programs to all rail operators.

Louise Cheeseman of IRO

IRO’s Rail Academy provides opportunities for quality learning using vast industry experiences that will guide and mentor or those looking to improve their skills development plans of a substantial number of apprentices. Undaunted by the enforced changes brought about by Covid-19, the IRO Apprenticeships team determined not to disappoint the 100+ students currently enrolled on programmes.

Offering a mixture of tried and tested courses with the ability to tailor learning for staff of varying experience levels, this is an exciting new way for rail staff to develop their knowledge and skills on their current work commitments.

All learning material is available to learners via a customised, branded ‘learning room’ or platform that is housed within the Rail Academy.

Rail Academy consists of IRO’s industry leading online courses:

• Introduction to Rail Online Interactive Courses, as well as Rail Pro. The 120 element Rail Pro learning modules can then create a bespoke field book incorporating these courses into new or current learning standards for their staff. This means new and current staff will have immediate access to knowledge that is directly relevant to their role in railway operations. There are options for managers and supervisors to create and integrate bespoke assessments for individual team members, choosing the ability to monitor learners’ progress on their learning journey all hosted in one place within Rail Academy.

Programmes are certified by the Institution of Railway Operators with certificates available to all learners who complete the individual elements of the programme.

Institution of Railway Operators can work with you to create your own field book to incorporate the learning from our courses, into your learners’ day-to-day operational roles. The option to mark your learners work or have an IRO Tutor take care of this, is also available.

Following a successful pilot and launch of Rail Academy earlier this year, there has never been better time to speak with us about this one-of-a-kind offering. As Rail Academy is 100% online, any further unprecedented events now or in the future are unlikely to derail learners’ progress.

To find out more about Rail Academy and how it can help your teams, simply visit railacademy.com or contact the IRO Industry Engagement Team at: railacademy@railwayoperators.co.uk and we will happily talk through the various options and opportunities open to you within this programme.

Our goal is to work with you to ensure your staff understand their role in the railway system and to help them develop the knowledge and skills they need to achieve their full potential.
Green light for new Train Driver EPA arrangements

Train driver employers across England realised there was a need to establish an industry-recognised standard to create a professional train driver workforce.

So to do the right thing for the industry, TOCs and FOCs came together in a stable group, and working with IRO, the National Skills Academy for Rail, they developed the Train Driver apprenticeship standard, which fully reflects the current industry. IRO has only ever EPA approved to deliver the end-point assessment.

When IRO was forced to close the doors on its Train Driver End-Point Assessment (EPA) centre in March, little did everyone know it would be last time it would run in this format this year. Until that point, the 2-3 day face-to-face assessment model was the only way for train driver apprentices to complete their EPA and receive their well-deserved level 3 apprenticeship qualification. So, with the national lockdown forcing the postponement of all scheduled driver EPA events indefinitely, IRO knew they had to work fast to come up with workable alternatives to meet the industry needs.

Work started in earnest, researching which elements of the EPA could be moved online and which IT platforms could be adopted without losing the quality of either the assessment or the experience for apprentices. By the end of week one, the team had chosen the right platform and the build had started. New apprentice mock test materials and user guides were created, staff were bought back from furlough and the remote model of rail assessor provision was ready.

IRO cannot employ independent assessors as they would then lose their competency in driving and no organisation who employs such people typically has them to spare. That is why the idea of release for a period of weeks or months is game-changing for the flow of apprentices through their EPA while also enabling IRO to give back to the industry it supports.

Not knowing how long lockdown would last it worked on new premises that would give the quiet, professional but also socially distanced setting needed to conduct assessments. New Invigilators were recruited and trained to be the main IRO point of contact for apprentices and to guide them through the EPA process.

Less than 3 months after face-to-face EPA was forced to stop, the first apprentice went through the new online delivery. The previous 2-3 day model has been slimmed to a five-hour assessment online with the final hurdle, the practical Planned Working Observation element, now being replaced with a witness testimony provided by the apprentice’s employer and a live question and answer session conducted by the IRO independent assessor as part of the remote EPA.

The beauty of this model is that it can be scaled according to demand and it has enabled IRO, in line with its not-for-profit motive, to develop a cost effective solution to meet the needs of the industry it serves. To date over 100 apprentices have been through the new remote delivery, with 60% of them rating that overall satisfaction of their EPA experience as ‘excellent or very good’.

So when over the summer, an opportunity arose to design and roll out a Level 3 Award in Education and Training, IRO teaching supremes Tony Manktelow and Tina Morris rose to the challenge and eleven volunteers from across the rail industry joined the programme.

The training took place over six days that were spaced a week apart. Each training day was then divided into two 90-minute sessions with a break in between, offering a good balance of instruction and practical exercises as you would expect from a train the trainer, assessor programme focused on skills development.

Participants progressed from basics covering the underlying knowledge and core skills development of teaching practice, one very full day of microteaching sessions where the learners got to demonstrate and put into practice their newly acquired knowledge via a 15 minute presentation to the rest of the group – a definite highlight for everyone. The final day was dedicated to adapting participants’ learning to IRO teaching and delivering the Intro to Rail course.

During the sessions, participants were encouraged to focus on how their content would land with the learners they were working with, as it became clear that many of the teams had been given content to cover and then left to use their natural skills to get the information across. Everyone enjoyed listening to folks from other disciplines and recognising that their challenges really are the same.

What has made the difference for EPA?

‘It’s been a collective exercise in cooperation and agility to manage this massive achievement in such a short time’, says Fiona Tordoff, IRO’s Chief Executive. ‘So many people and organisations have come together to make this work – it makes me very proud.’

At the vanguard for urgent reinstatement of the EPA service was Andy Botham of East Midlands Railway (EMR). He worked round the clock to ensure the new independent rail assessor materials were 100% proven before going live. EMR and Avanti West Coast must take huge credit for the innovative assessor release model they are supporting which IT platforms could be adopted without sacrificing the quality of either the assessment or the experience for apprentices. By the end of week one, the team had chosen the right platform and the build had started. New apprentice mock test materials and user guides were created, staff were bought back from furlough and the remote model of rail assessor provision was ready.

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What has the experience of conducting the Train Driver EPA remotely been like for you?

I am thoroughly enjoying the interaction that I have with the apprentices who are employed by different companies across England. I need to be completely independent from the apprentices to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest, so I get to find out how the railways works in the different regions and areas across the country. I am expanding my own knowledge and I get to attend regular standardisation meetings which keep me up to date on the changes made to the EPA and ensure that all assessors are consistent in the way that we conduct our assessments.

For further information:
For further information, or if you would like to discuss an application, please contact the IRO Learning and Development team on 0333 207 0039 or email knowledge@railwayoperators.co.uk

We caught up with Laura Wilding, train driver with EMR and IRO Assessor, to ask her about her experience of train driver apprentice assessments.

For further information:
For further information please visit https://www.railwayoperators.co.uk/end-point-assessment/
The pandemic seemed to strike from multiple angles at once, with everyday life closing down day after day. This was no different with our events programme, when it soon became clear that members travelling to an indoor event was no longer safe to do.

We all hoped this would be relatively short-lived and we would be able to continue with our events plan, so we postponed the next couple of indoor events as the impact became clearer. We then realised that any event that required actual physical attendance was unlikely for some time, so we met (virtually of course!) as an area council and we were able to do this and deliver to a large audience. Working with the Stafford team we were able to do this and I’m delighted to say we have hosted 3 on-line events with 2 more planned this year. Moving on-line was to find a platform we could use that could deliver an on-line programme, but the challenge then was to find out about events happening in your area.

In spite of the pandemic, it’s very encouraging that our on-line events have gone down well with members from across the country (and beyond) to watch the presentation and ask questions. It is also great that we can make a recording available which makes these events more accessible. As an area council, we take pride in organising the variety of events, with the support of some fantastic presenters and we really do appreciate members taking the time to join us during these events. Staying connected, engaged and informed is critical during these challenging times, particularly for those who are now predominantly working from home. As area councils, we will continue to support members so please do get in touch if you think we can help you in any way.

History of accident reporting - Ladbroke Grove 1999

North East Area
Adrian Caffrey

On 16 September 2020, IRO North East region were delighted to host Greg Morse of the RSSB (Rail Safety and Standards Board) for a webinar outlining the importance of learning from accidents to ensure our rail network continues to be the safest in Europe.

This proved to be an extremely popular event with almost 200 IRO members attending on the evening as Greg delivered a thought-provoking walk through the tragic events culminating in the Ladbroke Grove train crash. At 08:06 on Tuesday, 5 October 1999, two passenger services operated by Thames Trains and First Great Western collided almost head-on at a combined speed of around 130mph after Signal SN109 had previously been passed at danger. This led to the loss of 31 lives and a further 417 injuries - one of the worst rail accidents of the 20th Century. The Q&A session at the end of the talk proved to be very popular, with Greg answering as many questions as possible in person, online and later via email.

After a harrowing reminder of the consequences of unsafe behaviours, Greg described how technology such as Automatic Train Protection (ATP) could have prevented such a catastrophic event. However, the fitment had been rejected resulting in severe damage to public confidence in the management of Britain’s privatised railway. The recommendations of Lord Cullen’s inquiry into the accident led to the creation of the Rail Safety and Standards Board in 2003, followed by the Rail Accident Investigation Branch in 2005.

Please check the IRO website www.railwayoperators.co.uk/whats-on/ to find out about events happening in your area.