



Work & Play Profile Series *David O'Leary*

A Refreshing Change?

Andrew Fisher, Director in our Interim Transport and Infrastructure Practice, chats to David O'Leary (not the football manager) about his career in the Railways and how the sector has transformed over the years.

Could you start by telling us a what it is that you do right now?

My most recent senior role was as Commercial & Customer Experience Director at Transport for Wales.

What was your first job in rail and how did your career develop?

After working in the hospitality, retail and aviation sectors for over 20 years, I took the step to join Merseyrail as Commercial Director in 2016 – bringing my experiences from other sectors into the rail industry. I was keen to join a rail sector embracing opportunities to grow, employing some great people and ultimately providing an essential service to the UK economy. I was later to join Transport for Wales as Commercial and Customer Experience Director at a time of significant change, where we were looking to transform rail travel in Wales and the borders.

What are the biggest changes you have seen in your career to date?

The most significant change of recent years has been the massive changes in working patterns and working from home. Driven initially by the Covid pandemic, both where and the way that people work has changed forever.

The way in which we provide rail services to passengers has therefore changed, as patterns of travel demand misalign with our previous patterns of supply. This has arguably impacted every element of our operation – when we operate services, how much capacity we provide when, how we provide customer service to our passengers and how we develop products and price them. A challenge across every part of the industry.

When you are recruiting what are the most important skills you look for?

One of the most important skills in the rail industry is the ability to work effectively in a multiple stakeholder environment – building and developing relationships, understanding how to engage people and achieve business aims. Also of importance to me is the ability of individuals to continuously push for improvement in what we do and how we do it – having a hunger to drive things forward every day. Lastly, but of no less importance, the ability to help people and teams grow. People are the heart of the railway – investing in their growth, invests in the ongoing success of the railway.

What do you see as the key challenges facing rail today?

Adapting to the travel patterns of our existing customers following the Covid pandemic, whilst better embracing those potential customers who do not use the railway currently – or we could encourage to use more.

Making our railway a more sustainable business, growing demand to meet supply across the day, whilst ensuring that our services are timed to meet customers'.

Truly placing the customer at the heart of decision making is paramount – operating our services when they want them, and going where they want to go.



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What would you like to see from a new government?

A more considered and longer-term outlook on the railway and railway investment as a whole. We should be planning our infrastructure needs years in advance of them being needed, planning for the investment long before it is needed and achieving cross-party support in its delivery. Finally – deliver on these commitments.

In terms of rail operator, I believe the government should empower the private sector to do more, granting longer contracts to enable greater investment.

Lastly, fully commit to developing the best possible operating model for the industry. Whether that is GBR or another form, an aligned industry with clear common goals is absolutely needed.

Quickfire

What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

Spending time with my wife and our dog – enjoying some relaxation time before the impending birth of our first child!

I am also a qualified ski instructor, so spending time in the mountains is always on the cards during the winter months

What is your favourite movie?

I would probably say The Shawshank Redemption - an amazing story with some brilliant actors.

What band would you listen to over and over?

The Stereophonics – a band great in my teenage years, still producing great music many years later!

Which city could you live in forever?

Liverpool. I had never been before until I moved there for work about 10 years ago – but absolutely loved living there. An interesting history, lovely people and culture, great shopping, restaurants and nightlife.



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