

Work & Play Profile Series David Simpson



Getting the railways back on track

Andrew Fisher, Director in our Interim Transport and Infrastructure Practice, chats to David Simpson, an experienced rail operations specialist about his learnings over a career in the transport industry and what he thinks will come next in the sector.

Could you start by telling us who you are and what you do at the moment?

My name is David Simpson and I am a Service Delivery Director. I was with ScotRail up until January 2024 where I led the train crew, performance, and control and service planning functions.

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

I joined the British Rail Graduate scheme from university and, after training, my first appointment was Station Manager at Bedford. This role covered a range of activities which in today's railway would be split amongst several companies! After that, I progressed through various roles in freight and passenger operations around the midlands, before taking responsibility for a restructuring project for signalling staff, which coincided with privatisation and the creation of Railtrack. Since then, I've worked in various parts of the industry - the last 18 years in Scotland.

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

Within rail, privatisation, which divided what was one company into many parts, splitting train operations from infrastructure. I've worked on both sides of that over the years, which has given invaluable exposure to the different priorities and challenges faced. The biggest lesson, though, is to maintain the focus on the end customer, whether passenger or freight – its all too easy to get caught up in internal railway matters!

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

It sounds a bit cliched but attitude and appetite for the role being recruited to are key; in recent years, the ability to collaborate effectively, and be flexible and adaptable around changing and emerging demands have been increasingly important.

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

In the short term, focusing on better day-to-day delivery, and trying to resolve the various IR challenges will create more confidence for customers. Finding ways to reduce net cost is also key, so that better value for money can be demonstrated – this needs to be a mix of growing revenue whilst managing costs effectively, whilst finding more efficient ways to deliver improvements such as new stations. With a change in UK government, advising and responding to any new strategy and policy will also be important but must not distract from day-to-day delivery.

What would you like to see from the new government?

Some clarity on industry structure and future strategy – there have been so many reports on this in recent years which have not been implemented which has arguably led to some drift – In some ways, the industry can take the initiative and help government determine the best way forward and then get in and deliver that.

Quickfire

What do you enjoy doing outside of work – enjoying the countryside in south west Scotland where I live, including cycling and dog walking, in all weathers!

What is your favourite movie – Local Hero

What is your favourite band – Mark Knopfler's solo albums

What is your favourite city – Birmingham, having studied there and also worked there at various points in my career – it is a great city!

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