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Technology vs psychology

Many of us are familiar with terms like 'trains per hour' and 'headway'. How closely trains can follow each other along a track and through junctions is a key element of signalling design. As well as optimising the design of the signalling, automatic train operation is starting to be used on national rail networks (and has been used on metros for many years of course), and modern traffic management systems increasingly enable near-optimal network operation. But our focus as engineers tends to be on optimising train movements rather than enabling individual passengers or items of freight to move around the railway.

As we get close to the physical limits of throughput of trains, the wider 'system' – including the people who travel by train – becomes an increasingly significant factor in the limits to capacity. People need to move quickly through stations and board or alight from trains, if stopping times (dwell times) are to be managed effectively. Having a train control system that can deliver 40 trains per hour between two stations is not much help if the trains have to stop for over a minute to allow people to join and leave each train.

So the psychology of people – how they behave and how they make decisions when using the railway – is increasingly critical to network performance. As members of the institution for railway signalling and telecommunications, train control, traffic management and allied professions, we have a role to play in adopting new technologies and approaches to enable people to move through the network efficiently and safely. The provision of timely, accurate and useful information on stations and on trains is a vital part of 'signalling the passenger'. Our industry is changing more quickly than ever in its 150-year history, and we have to continue to change with it if we are to meet society's expectations.

The Editorial Team

Front Cover: The level crossing at the famous tourist spot of Kamakura on JR-East's Yokosuka line, Japan. The photo shows omni-directional warning lights and the railway signals. *Photo Kotaro Mori of JR-East.*

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