NEWS VIEW 213
Have we forgotten the signaller?

It was IRSE past-President Tony Howker who, in a paper presented in 1988, posed the question 'have we forgotten the driver'? Tony argued that the history of signalling technology has been all about protecting the signaller from human errors, all the while taking it for granted that the drivers would obey signals with total reliability.

Development of the Train Protection & Warning System has largely answered Tony's concerns. But are we now in danger of forgetting the signaller in the excitement surrounding the Digital Railway?

In May, Network Rail invited me to see the DeltaRail IECC Scalable installation at Marylebone which had recently replaced one of first IECCs to be commissioned. Indeed, a visit to Marylebone in 1991 was my first experience of the new 'glass signalbox'.

After a demonstration on the full scale simulator of what nearly a quarter century of innovation has produced, we went down to the identical installation on the working floor. And what immediately struck me was the high workload for signallers in this small control room enjoying probably the highest degree of automation on the network.

Phone calls were coming in all the time, from fringing boxes, User Worked Crossings, technicians seeking short term access to the track. A pie chart on the synoptic track diagram showed the proportion of trains running under Enhance Automatic Route Setting, and even with this well into the 90% range there was still old fashioned entry/ exit route setting to be done.

Meanwhile, the latest version of the de-scoped Traffic Management (TM) proposed for Thameslink has been pared down to plan/re-plan with 'Isolated TM' providing signallers with revised schedules via Signallers Advisory Display (SAD) screens on their desks. Signallers would then have to implement the revised timetable manually which can only add to the workload - especially if they have not got E-ARS and all the other clever stuff I saw at Marylebone.

Evolution at Marylebone has seen new tools introduced to ease the signaller's workload on a railway which is significantly busier than it was in 1991. Across the network the demand is for more paths and more trains running at closer headways.

In the enthusiasm to embrace the digital railway revolution have we chased the big picture and forgotten what the 21st Century signaller really needs? At Marylebone, to coin a phrase, I saw the future and it is already working. Effective ARS, engineers' possessions applied at the drag of a mouse, enhanced Automatic Code Insertion independent of re-platforming, and more to come.

With a collective 35 years in the job, the signallers I met at Marylebone were already exploiting the new technology. And they knew what enhancements they would like to see next. Perhaps the question should be 'have we listened to the signaller'?

Roger Ford

Front Cover: Queensland Rail Suburban Multiple Unit 238 arrives at Springfield Central station on the Darra to Springfield Transport Corridor, Tuesday 2 June 2015, during a site visit of the IRSE International Convention in Australia.
Photo: Ian James Allison.

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