Rail Plant Association Update

RPA Acting-Chairman Darren Matthews reports on the current initiatives of the association for road/rail plant owners.

Hello RPA article readers and welcome! Summer is here and our nation is opening once again after another Covid lockdown. At the time of writing, the delayed Euro 2020 tournament, Wimbledon and the Tour de France were all well underway. The latter is something close to my heart with Mark Cavendish matching Eddy Merckx's Tour de France world record of 34 stage wins.

More good news. Literally millions in the UK have now received their second vaccination, protecting themselves against Covid-19 and helping prevent the virus spreading further. There are a few more miles to go, but we are rolling down the track in the right direction. So, please follow government guidelines and hopefully we will not suffer any delays on the way.

Operational challenges

Our theme to discuss operational challenges has been warmly received over the past five articles and, for those of you who have given feedback, thank you very much - we really do appreciate it. As a quick update, we have previously discussed:

■ Issue No: 138 - Delivery Point Management and Plant Fitter Competence.

■ Issue No: 139 - On-track Plant Operations Scheme (POS).

■ Issue No: 140 - Fatigue Management.

■ Issue No: 141 - Plant Reliability (Rail PPS).

This time we want to touch on 'safety behaviours' of On-Track Plant (OTP) staff working on railway sites. The subject of behaviour is far too complex for me, your humble narrator, to speak of in any depth. But we, the RPA, feel this is a topic that needs mentioning now due to the concerning number of incidents and accidents involving OTP.

Safety has to start at the top. We do not doubt companies that promote safety as their number one priority are being honest and genuinely do not want accidents to occur. Yet they do. The questions we need to ask ourselves right now are:

■ What can we do short-term to help stop OTP incidents?

■ What long-term solutions could we introduce to make OTP operations safer?

The answer to these is for the industry to decipher. But when you reflect on what behaviours you can influence, consider our OTP operator community. Some of you may recall back in Issue No: 140 we wrote:
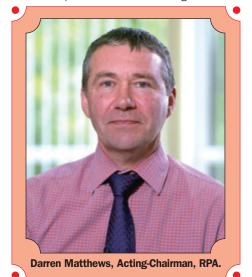
'It is worth noting, the OTP operator community has changed over the past two decades. At the turn of the millennium, most OTP operators had a full-time post with their employers. This was achievable in a railway that offered many midweek shifts to support the weekend shifts. The ratio 20 years ago would be close to 90% full-time OTP operator to 10% 'zero hour' operators looking to top up their midweek work earnings outside the railway industry. Today, the ratios have closely reversed. Midweek shifts are few and far between and employers simply cannot afford to keep operators sat at home on pay waiting for that weekend shift.'

It is important to realise influencing behaviours will be much harder to achieve

with zero-hour staff who work on the odd shift at weekends rather than with full-time staff. Especially since those zero-hour workers go straight to site on hire, meaning the OTP employer is unlikely to meet their operators at all. There are other factors, too, such as:

■ Selection of OTP workers - We are all different and holding a specific competence does not make a person 'right for the job'. As employers, should we be looking beyond competence, for example, psychometric testing? Understandably, this may make it even harder to find operators when we, as an industry, are already short.

■ Fatigue management - We have already written about this in Issue No:140, but it is worth noting here since it has been an underlying cause in many events and is linked to human factors/behaviours.
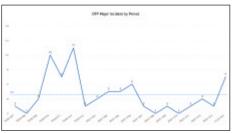
We should also mention that some behaviours on-site are driven by time-pressure (be that actual or perceived). Over-run risks are real concerns and can influence site managers/supervisors' behaviours, resulting in them focusing on the over-run threat rather than maintaining site safety and good on-site change management. Other time pressures are, however, perceived rather than actual. Historic accident investigations detailed behaviours changed for personal gain (for example, the opportunity to finish early and go home). This aspect, also known as 'Job and knock', has long been a reward for finishing planned works before the planned shift time ending.
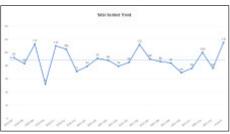

Darren Matthews, Acting-Chairman, RPA.

In the actual scenario where an overrun is imminent, how supportive would the infrastructure manager be with their principal contractors when they explained the over-run occurred because of an unforeseen event, but they continued in a safe manner as opposed to rushing everyone and cutting corners?

Supporting data

The focus on OTP safety is justified, and the graph below shows 87 major incidents in a 20-month period with a rising trend*. In the past few of months, some of our colleagues have sustained life-changing injuries.

The total incidents show 1,856 events logged. (Please note, this is a minimum number. Not all incidents are known by Network Rail).

*The data is in raw format and not yet sense checked at the time of publishing.

Food for thought

This article did not set out to find solutions, but we, the RPA, are eager to support and even lead the industry to help stop OTP incidents. Here are some points for consideration. Rushing or corner-cutting are behaviours driven by over-run risks. But is it fair to shift the blame to Network Rail for possession time pressures when our responsibility is to plan and execute work safely at all costs? The OTP operator community is primarily zero-hour. But we can still positively influence their behaviour by personal performance monitoring?

Nearly there

Well, our station is arriving, but before we get off, let us take a moment to reflect on the positives. Our OTP works thousands of shifts every month without concern and that is to be celebrated. The collective view of the RPA is that the introduction of POS back in December 2015 has tangibly enhanced OTP safety thanks to:

■ Better planning.

■ On-site assurance monitoring.

■ Reduced on-site bullying.

■ Responsibilities placed on the OTP owners who provide POS services.

Perhaps now, six years after the implementation of POS, it is time to review/enhance the POS requirement and raise the bar a bit further?