Building A Resilient Railway Through Its Workforce

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SUMMARY

Women make up 51% of the UK population but only 16% of the UK rail industry's workforce. Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people make up 14% of the UK population and are underrepresented in the industry by making up around 6% of the workforce. Only 16% of adults with autism are in full-time paid employment, compared to 80% of non-disabled people. Choosing to ignore the underrepresentation of women, BAME and neurodivergent people in the industry would mean missing out on talent. A diverse railway would be able to overcome a diverse set of problems. By encouraging a genuine diversity and inclusion agenda, recognising both conscious and unconscious bias, we can build a more resilient railway.

1 INTRODUCTION

The UK Railway industry is devoting an enormous amount of time and effort to get the best talent, but if our workforce cannot overcome setbacks and challenges those resources might be wasted. The industry might be good at facing certain problems, but we need a diverse skill set to be able to overcome any difficulty. We cannot have a resilient railway if we do not have the skills in place to ensure that the engineering and maintenance can be delivered.

2 HISTORY OF RAILWAYWOMEN

A brief look at the titles of books and articles relating to people working on the railway shows that almost all refer to 'railwaymen' whereas it is difficult to find much reference to the vital role that women have played over the years.

There is evidence that women played a part in the early construction of the railways. In the 1851 census there were three women listed as 'railway labourers', and in the 1850s Elizabeth Holman worked for the Great Western Railway as a navvy by pretending to be a man.

Only at the end of the 19th century were women employed in increasing numbers in administrative work and telecommunications.

The 20th century's two world wars changed women's employment opportunities on the railway, as railwaymen went to fight or operate railways abroad, forcing the railway companies to re-evaluate the contribution women could make. (Anon., n.d.)

Today, it is recognised that a strong, safe and resilient workforce is a diverse workforce. Women now make up 16% of the workforce, showing that the industry has come a long way since the 1850s. Various companies are developing strategies to further improve gender diversity, such as Network Rail's '20 by 20' target, which is to increase the take-up of female employees across the business to 20% by 2020.

3 THE FIRST MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE RAILWAY INDUSTRY

There is evidence that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) workers were employed on the railway throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, their numbers were small and reflected the make-up of British society at this time.

It was not until after World War Two that there was a significant change in patterns of migration to Britain. An increase in wages and improved prospects in the employment market meant that there were many jobs that British workers considered unattractive because of low pay and poor conditions. In the 1940s, Eastern European workers

were taken on by the railway to fill these roles before larger recruitment drives took place. British Railways were just one of a number of employers who actively recruited from the West Indies post World War Two.

By the 1950s, there were several thousand black men working for British Railways. However, their experience was generally poor once they arrived to work in the UK. There was little introduction to values, culture and geography, in an industry that for over 100 years had developed a lifestyle and culture of its own. For many decades the stereotypes of BAME workers often held firm. Officially there was no colour bar operating within British Railways, but there are many accounts of applications and promotions being blocked due to an individual's colour or background.

Railway trade unionism played a large part in changing attitudes towards BAME people in the railway industry. The unions encouraged solidarity amongst all workers and there are accounts of racial tensions in the workplace being alleviated as BAME people stood together with colleagues in support of ballots and strikes. The rise of the National Front in the 1970s resulted in the railway trade unions taking a stand against all forms of racism, which is still strong. (Anon., n.d.)

Today the industry is coming together to actively promote the railway as an employer of choice for people from a BAME background. However, there is still a long way to go as BAME people only make-up 6% of the workforce, while making up 14% of the overall UK population.

Underrepresentation is not the only issue the industry needs to tackle, according to a survey from the Royal Academy of Engineering, a third of ethnic minority engineers believe the culture of engineering is 'not very inclusive'. (Anon., 2017)

The report also found that female engineers were half as likely as their male colleagues to perceive the culture of engineering as 'very inclusive', and that white engineers were significantly more likely to 'feel included' in engineering than colleagues from BAME backgrounds.

In fact, 85% of BAME engineers said that assumptions were made about them based on their ethnicity or nationality, compared to 58% of their white colleagues.

The issues of gender equality and BAME representation have been well-publicised, rightly, with the gender wage gap coming under increasing widespread scrutiny.

There are also other aspects of diversity in the modern world that we should consider and that are not so widely covered or talked about. This means developing specific strategies to include ex-offenders, care leavers and people who are neurodivergent. (Clarke, 2018)

4 NEURODIVERSITY

'Neurodivergent' encompasses those with autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and a variety of other neural conditions, which for so long have been pathologised as medical conditions to be mitigated, and even cured, but are now seen as natural forms of human neurocognitive variation. Thanks to the 'social model' of disability, the realisation has grown that many of the challenges that have previously defined and stereotyped neurodivergent individuals are the result of societies and workplaces being organised keeping 'neurotypicals' in mind.

Only 16% of autistic people are in long term paid employment. Many of those people possess cyber aptitude and skills, that with the right environment, role and leadership, can far outperform their peers. Currently, there is a cyber skills gap, and this group of people who possess new ways of thinking could contribute significantly to the solution.

To continue excluding such a significant demographic, risks missing out on talent and compromising on productivity and customer trust. More pertinently, the business case for diversity has highlighted the importance of 'diversity of thought' – get people with different perspectives, backgrounds and experiences in a room, and your team will be

more innovative and creative. In a sense, neurodiversity may be one of the most challenging areas of diversity and inclusion – complex, nuanced, and often invisible – yet it offers a business upside in this context; given that neurodivergent people literally think differently.

Including people who are neurodivergent requires a conscious effort on the part of recruiters. According to the social model of disability, disabilities must be seen in the context of their environment – in this case, it is not hard to see how, for example, conventional job interviews could be particularly challenging for an autistic job applicant, a messy spreadsheet could be problematic for certain dyslexic individuals, or static, rote work might not suit an ADHDer. Neurodivergent people face a range of challenges that may make aspects of the workplace uncomfortable, or certain tasks harder to pick up or more problematic. (Anon., n.d.)

4.1 What Is Neurodiversity?

The term neurodiversity refers to the infinite range of differences in individual human brain function and behavioural traits.

Humans have tended to use significantly more positive language when discussing cultural diversity or biodiversity than when discussing neurodiversity. Instead, negative and medicalised language has dominated – witness the very term 'autism spectrum disorder' and the double negative 'ADHD'.

The progress of changing societal understanding and attitudes has been slow, it's shocking to note that as recently as the 1970s, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). (Bayer, 1987)

The IQ test, barely challenged for 100 years, reflects a popular conception that human intelligence is fixed, on a linear scale. In the 1980s, Harvard professor Howard Gardner argued, instead, that we may be better off thinking of each of us as having 'multiple intelligences' – including visual-spatial, interpersonal, logical, musical and kinaesthetic.

When we describe people as 'neurodivergent', then, we are talking about people who in one or several respects have a thinking style at the edges of one or more of the continuums, with a brain that functions in ways that deviate significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal'. Previously, society has tended to treat these alternative thinking styles as disorders – conditions diagnosed most often in childhood, by a deficit model – focusing on what the child struggles with, when compared with their peers. This has led, unsurprisingly, to a preoccupation with finding ways to help the neurodivergent individual better 'fit in' – effectively, to act and function as closely as possible to a 'neurotypical'. There has been much less focus or appreciation on the true and often unique capabilities of such individuals, who though may struggle with one task type, can excel in others. (Branton Shearer & Karanian, 2017)

Neurodiversity, as a term and as a category of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, may appear to have come out of nowhere. However, there are a number of factors behind its sudden prominence – factors that explain why organisations globally, and across multiple industry sectors, are now taking steps to be neurodiversity smart.

The growing body of prevalence data surrounding autism, dyslexia, and ADHD has increased global awareness of neurodiversity. Most notably, more diagnoses of autism – according to Autism Speaks, a 600% increase in two decades in the United States – has led to widespread political and media coverage, and concerns of an 'epidemic'. In the US, the apparent prevalence of ADHD has continued to increase rapidly during the same time period. Research has challenged the idea of 'epidemics', suggesting growing prevalence is due to changing reporting and diagnostic practices. (Hansen, et al., 2015) Regardless, it is now widely accepted that neurominorities represent, in total, a large percentage of the overall population, likely greater than 10%. For the rail industry, this means that more than one in ten job applicants, existing staff and customers are likely neurodivergent in some way.

5 DIVERSITY AT WORK

5.1 Recruitment And Selection

Successful talent management starts with the hiring process - the majority of which have typically been designed only with neurotypicals in mind. Such processes can have the effect of unintentionally excluding neurodiverse talent. Simple adjustments to what can be seen as common 'friction points' can – as with other aspects of neurodiversity inclusion – have broader benefits beyond the neurodivergent demographic.

Ensuring neurodiversity is highlighted as part of the organisation's employer brand, listing employee resource groups relating to disability or neurodiversity, including micro case studies of how individual neurodivergent employees have been supported, will likely encourage other talented applicants to apply.

5.2 Role Descriptions

Often, hiring managers will fall into the trap of re-using past job descriptions that may include skills requirements that are not necessary for the role in question. There is also a tendency to look to hire generalists, who appear to tick 'all' possible boxes relating to a particular role. Yet such an approach is likely to exclude individuals with narrower and deeper strengths. The frequent requirement for 'excellent communication skills' could, for example, discourage applications from individuals who are outstanding in information and data processing, essential skills for the role, but less confident and competent socially.

Reviewing job adverts for gendered or other biased wording is important. For example, noting that a company culture is "work hard, play hard" might deter a diverse range of candidates from applying.

Including a diversity and inclusion statement in the job description – stating you are happy to discuss reasonable adjustments – signals that your organisation consciously welcomes candidates with different identities and thinking styles.

Removing unconscious bias, enabling blind recruitment on several levels, avoiding penalising neurodivergent applicants for patchy educational or work history, should be considered as candidate filtering tools.

Candidates should be offered opportunities throughout the hiring process to disclose as neurodivergent. Disclosure at this stage can have the benefit of facilitating a discussion on potential accommodations, such as bringing a supporter to an interview, interviewing via a telephone or video chat, or additional time to take work assessments. However, there is no general duty for people to disclose.

5.3 Interviews

A conventional interview is often principally a test of recall and 'social competence'. This form of assessment can put some neurodivergent people at disadvantage, making it harder for them to demonstrate the skills and aptitudes required for the job role in question. For example, some people may be overly honest about weaknesses, struggle with eye contact or lack confidence because of previous bad experiences.

Being given time to absorb interview questions and having questions asked in the same sequence can be beneficial for dyslexic individuals and for other neurodivergent people.

5.4 Alternative Assessments

Work trials, practical assessments (either in person or remote) and mini apprenticeships can be considered as alternative assessment methods beyond interviews. These all have the benefit of focusing on the applicant's ability to perform the job role. The assessments should have clear stated purpose, along with instructions and questions.

Work samples may be preferable to psychometric tests, which may not give a true picture of someone who is neurodivergent, even with the reasonable adjustment of extra time.

5.5 Candidate Selection

There is clear evidence that recruitment processes are subject to bias. How best to tackle our own unconscious biases is not clear; however, paying attention to the touchpoints in recruitment and understanding where intervention might be required is a good place to start.

Examining recruitment data can help understand how diverse the talent pool is at each stage of the selection process, where possible. Selection methods need to be reviewed and checked if a variety of candidates make it to the shortlist but not the final interview.

6 INCLUSION IS ALSO IMPORTANT

Often organisations focus on increasing the diversity without focusing on the necessary foundation that enables diversity. A company can certainly hire in diversity, whether it is more women, BAME or neurodivergent people, but if the company's culture does not embrace different perspectives, they will not be able to retain diversity. Inclusion requires that everyone's contributions be valued, that individuals, regardless of diversity dimension, have the opportunity to do their best work and advance.

Inclusion is about belonging. There are numerous questions in engagement surveys that measure whether employees feel they belong, such as "My ideas and suggestions count", "This organisation values my contribution" and "My manager treats me with dignity and respect". Companies can also look at turnover data with a diversity lens to see if there is a disproportionate number of women or ethnic minorities leaving the organisation compared to the majority group. Exit interviews and Glassdoor reviews are also indicators of how inclusive an organisation's culture is. (Burg, 2018)

6.1 Building An Inclusive Workplace

6.1.1 Awareness Training

Training across the organisation can help develop a general awareness, understanding and appreciation of colleagues. There is a risk that uninformed colleagues may see a struggling neurodivergent co-worker as lazy or inept. This can then make employees less willing to disclose their neurodiversity, and in extreme cases, there may be bullying or complaints about someone's work or behaviour.

Through suitable training, staff can become comfortable about how to talk about neurodiversity. Establishing a basic etiquette will help to put neurodivergent employees at ease, while also allowing management and colleagues to approach issues without fear of 'getting it wrong'.

Training for managers can help provide them with a core understanding of the reality of neurodiversity, strategies for responding to disclosure, giving clear instructions, assisting with potential challenge areas, introducing change sensitively, and so on.

6.1.2 Flexible Working

One key way to support inclusion at work is taking a flexible approach appreciating that we all have multiple identities that influence our experience inside and outside of work. This means flexible work arrangements must themselves be flexible. Making work flexible goes beyond allowing full-time jobs to be conducted from home or with flexible start and finish times (although undoubtedly this is important). Flexibility recognises that throughout their working life, individuals have different needs when it comes to flexible working.

6.1.3 The Working Environment

Bright office lights can be distracting and can contribute to sensory overload. Neurodivergent employees could be given a workspace away from such lighting, and with more natural light.

Noisy open plan environments can also be highly distracting. HR can assign neurodivergent employees a desk in a quieter area or even a private office, and allow the use of headphones or earplugs.

Equipment such as photocopiers should have visible instructions nearby, as this is likely to be helpful to individuals with dyspraxia, and so often, for all employees.

7 OTHER AREAS TO CONSIDER

When thinking about diversity and inclusion, most organisations focus on gender and ethnic diversity, and recently neurodiversity. However, there are other areas to consider as well, that can help organisations, and the rail industry in general, to be truly inclusive of individuals from different walks of life.

7.1 'Ban The Box'

The international Ban the Box campaign is designed to offer a level playing field and fair chance of employment to ex-offenders. There are currently 11 million people in the UK who have a criminal record, representing a significant portion of the adult population. At the moment, ex-offenders must tick a box that asks them to disclose their criminal record when filling a job application, immediately categorising them in the eyes of the employer. Banning the box seems a simple step to take and could really make a difference to people's lives.

7.2 Care Leavers

Care leavers are young adults who have often not had the stability and support within the care system that their peer group from stable family backgrounds have had. This lack of stability can often result in a disrupted educational experience. As a result, many care leavers enter adulthood without the necessary qualifications to begin applying for jobs. Looking beyond the traditional means of quantifying ability would help offer opportunities to those who need it – a key component in diversifying the workforce. Just because someone does not have the required qualifications, does not mean that they are unsuitable for work or unable to learn.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Every organisation in the rail industry is in a different part of the ongoing journey of becoming more diverse and inclusive. Having specific goals for diversity and inclusion and regularly measuring progress is key. Organisations need to ask themselves a few questions: Does the leadership of the organisation reflect the available talent pool in the marketplace? Are women, people of colour and neurodivergent people advancing at the same rate as neurotypical white men? Do our hires reflect the available skilled talent in the market across all roles? Do our pay practices support pay equity? Do all employees feel like they are treated fairly?

With all the focus on advancing diversity, organisations also run the risk of backlash from majority groups. It is important to acknowledge this as a challenge and call out the elephant in the room. For example, white men make up only 40% of the UK population but over 70% of senior leadership, and it is even higher for CEOs (90%). If we are looking to have leadership reflect the population, that will mean a rebalancing of those opportunities, resulting in a perceived loss for the in-group. This is where education and awareness come in. The business case for diversity and inclusion is about ensuring that all qualified talent has the opportunity to contribute, grow and thrive. (Burg, 2018)

Academic research has found that diverse groups of people of average ability tend to outperform homogeneous groups at solving complex tasks, even where the homogeneous groups are more capable. In order to build a resilient railway, one that can overcome complex problems, we need a workforce that truly reflects the population and includes everyone. (Joecks, et al., 2012)

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