

## Remote working: the rail industry's new normal?

**Paul Whitcombe,**  
Programme and Delivery Director

### **With physical connection the very essence of railways, is remote working likely to continue in the post-Covid world?**

Over the past 20 years or so, the rapid proliferation of digital technology has seen remote working become an established part of the work landscape in many industries. However, before Covid-19 drove us all home earlier this year, remote working was still relatively unusual in the rail sector.

Railways are a physical entity: they rely on the rail infrastructure, trains, passengers and freight. A high proportion of the workforce has to be physically present, on trains, tracks and production lines. Traditionally these frontline workers have been supported on site by back-office staff, from project and technical managers to engineers and administrators.

Will the forced shift to more remote working as a result of Covid-19 have a long-term impact on operational design across the rail sector?

### **REMOTE POSSIBILITIES**

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, we have been helping a number of rail clients make the transition from site to home working, in some cases with surprising benefits for individuals and organisations.

Recent developments in sector-specific technology, in particular remote condition monitoring to collect data about trains, wheels and track, had already opened up new possibilities for managing railways remotely. These have come into their own in the current crisis, coupled with the tools now available to support remote communication, collaboration, project management, scheduling, reporting and productivity. With robust technology infrastructure and wireless connectivity, our clients are finding that many aspects of programme scheduling, project management and technical management can be done as efficiently from home as on site. The same holds true for design, engineering and procurement.



Individuals are reporting benefits in terms of being able to set their own work schedule and spend more time with their family. Rail companies are reporting improved efficiency and cost savings as a result of reduced travel and site overheads. In some cases, remote working is opening up international markets, with more flexible 'office' hours offsetting time zone differences and encouraging new connections between suppliers around the world. This interconnectedness has been amplified by the global nature of the coronavirus pandemic. There is a clear sense that the industry needs to pull together worldwide to overcome this new threat to our sector. Being physically separated from our immediate colleagues has raised awareness of the potential for remote collaboration farther afield.



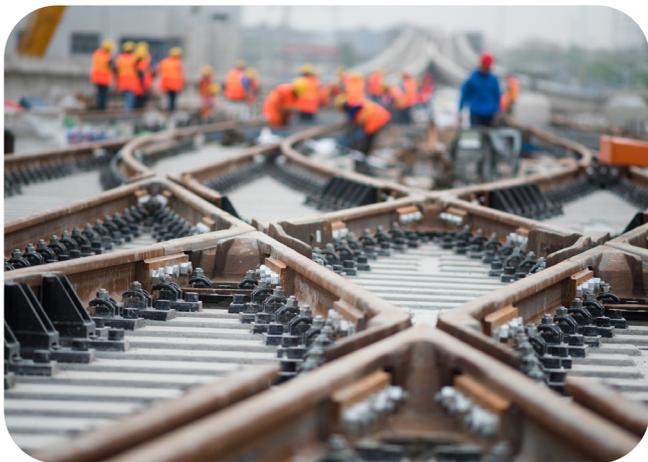
# Remote working: the rail industry's new normal?



## DISTANT DILEMMAS

However, even for job roles in the rail sector where it brings benefits, a wholesale move to remote working poses real challenges in the long term.

Any increase in remote working will necessitate rigorous new procedures, measures and requirements to ensure health and safety standards are maintained. Technical managers and engineers can oversee checks using photography and video, but ultimately need to get the complete picture in situ before signing off work. We have supported programmes where the bulk of project management has been done from a distance, although at some point you just need to go and ride the trains.



It is also important to recognise that remote working has its downsides. For every individual espousing the benefits of working from home, there is another who find it difficult and isolating. Similarly, although some employers are noting increased efficiency, others are reporting reduced productivity, particularly on tasks that require collaboration. Although a video call can be an effective way to share information and make decisions, it tends to be less successful as a means of forging relationships and building trust. The resultant impact on business relationships in the rail industry remains to be seen. Will we ever be truly happy to agree a complex deal with someone we have only met remotely? Is this likely to be less of a problem for the younger generation, who are more comfortable with remote communications?

The need to socially distance that triggered the move to remote working has particular implications for the rail industry. To enable passengers to maintain physical distance, companies are likely to have to modify carriages and access points. To protect employees, work sites may need to be reconfigured, shifts changed and work crews restructured. Will new tools be needed to support workforce location tracking and contact tracing? What effect will this have on employment contracts, remuneration and reward? Will pay structures change for those in regular contact with rail commuters and thus at higher risk?

## COMPLEX ISSUES: COHERENT SOLUTIONS

While Covid-19 didn't allow the rail industry time to plan for remote working, putting in place coherent, creative enablement plans will be vital as we transition to the new norm. As well as restructuring programmes in response to the challenges raised by the current pandemic, business change will need to be embedded within project teams to enable people and the culture to deliver sustainable results. At Harmonic, our recent work with rail clients has underlined the importance of being proactive, resilient, open to change and willing to learn from the remote working experience of other sectors.



Six months on from the emergence of Covid-19, many questions still remain about the long-term impact of the pandemic generally and on the rail industry specifically. Although there are considerable national differences, it does seem certain that the shift to remote working will continue, at least to some extent. The key now is for the rail community to build on the collaborative working and sense of common purpose that the pandemic has engendered to shape a stronger future for the sector.

*This Insight piece has been adapted from an article that Paul Whitcombe wrote for Rail Gazette International, June 2020.*

## HOW CAN HARMONIC HELP?

At Harmonic, we have extensive experience of helping rail companies win business and deliver projects more effectively. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, we have been advising clients from across the rail sector on response, recovery and resilience.



Get in touch today to find out more – either drop me an **email** or give me a call on **07856 659218**.

**PAUL WHITCOMBE**