

A series exploring Non-Technical Skills (NTS) and how they can benefit safety critical organisations

December 1, 2020



4 of 8 – What NTS are most important to train dispatchers?

Dr Stephen Fletcher, occupational psychologist and director at the [OPC](#), has written the 4th in the series of 8 articles about NTS. This article specifically explores NTS in relation to the train dispatcher's role. Previous articles have looked at the most important NTS for the roles of train driver and train conductor. Further articles in the series aim to cover how we can use NTS to help identify root causes of safety incidents as well as identifying NTS shortfalls through safety incident investigations.

The key role of train dispatchers in managing station safety

In the UK train dispatchers refers to those employees who will dispatch the train from platforms at stations. They play a critical role in helping to ensure a safe platform-train interface. There is a need for

our train dispatchers to always prioritise the safe dispatch of their trains. However, with our increasing emphasis on train performance the dispatcher needs to focus on safety first but also, wherever possible, to perform his/her train dispatch duties efficiently to help keep our trains to time. As with other safety critical roles Non-Technical Skills (NTS) will play an important part in helping them undertake their dispatch duties safely and effectively. If we were to choose then, what would be the most important NTS for a train dispatcher?

OPC worked with job experts to identify the key NTS for train dispatchers

OPC psychologists worked with a major UK train operator to help identify the NTS that are most important to its train dispatcher role. Job experts – safety managers and station managers, with in-depth knowledge of the train dispatcher role were asked to rate the importance of 26 NTS to the role. OPC psychologists then analysed the data and rank ordered the NTS in order of importance. The results are shown in the graph below:



Top 4 NTS for Train Dispatchers and their ranked importance



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* These NTS are based on the research published by the RSSB 2012 'Research Programme. Operations and Management. Non-technical skills for rail: A list of skills and behavioural markers for drivers, with guidance notes.

A summary of the results - the top four NTS

These results are from one UK train operator and a small group of job experts, so they should be treated with some caution. However, they do provide a valuable insight into the role of NTS in train dispatch.

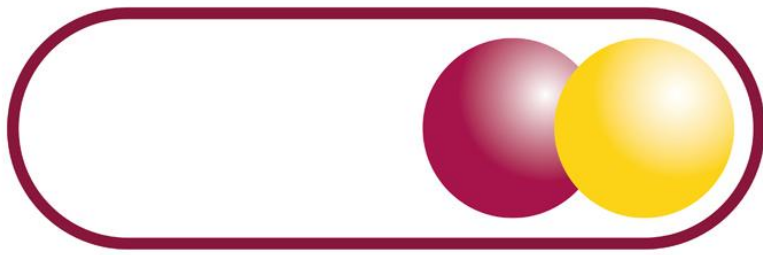
- The results from our job experts indicated that the NTS of 'prioritising' was most important for train dispatchers. Many, in addition to their dispatch duties will undertake customer service tasks too. These can collide during train dispatch with customers requesting information during the train dispatch task. In these situations, they need to prioritise the safe dispatch of the train over the customer query. A failure to do so could lead to errors and a potential safety incident. OPC Assessment has a specialist **Train Dispatch Concentration test** (TDCT) available that has been used by train operators for many years. It can help assess the key skill of concentrating on a safety critical operations task whilst multi-tasking.

The next three NTS were ranked as equal importance of 86% by job experts:

- The NTS of 'retaining information during the shift' is key to the train dispatcher role. Employees will need to remember job information in both the short- and long-term including details of what train will depart from which platform and at what time. The need to retain key information is likely to grow considerably during a disruption when significant changes can be made to the despatch schedule in real time.
- Additionally, during the dispatch process the train dispatcher needs to demonstrate the NTS of 'maintain concentration'. He/she needs to stay focused on the dispatch task and avoid distraction from whatever else might be going on around the station. In the case where there is a disruption, it is very important for the train despatch officer to employ both this key NTS as well as the one above, 'retaining information', to achieve safe and timely despatch of the train and customers.
- The last NTS that was rated as equally important by our job experts was 'anticipation of risk'. The train dispatcher will play a key role in identifying emerging risks that could impact on safety. These risks might include children playing too close to the platform edge or customers running to board the train when the dispatch process is almost complete. A safe and effective train dispatcher will recognise these situations as potential risks, think ahead to the possible dangers and then manage them to circumvent a safety incident. OPC Assessment has two assessment tools that can help assess this key NTS. The **Safety Awareness Test** (SAT) is an innovative work sample exercise. Candidates are presented with a number of different scenarios that they might experience around a train station or on board a train and they must identify the risks and hazards in each. Alongside the SAT there is also the newly launched **Risk Anticipation and Time Focus Questionnaire** (RTQ) that assesses an individual's personality in relation to managing risk and time. This new tool can really add value to the recruitment of new train dispatchers, as well as help existing dispatchers to develop and enhance their NTS of 'risk anticipation'.

Dr Stephen Fletcher concluded by saying "Train dispatchers need to be able to dispatch their trains safely and effectively. Many will also undertake other safety critical duties too whilst working in the station where there may be heightened safety risks. It is important that we recruit station staff who have the right NTS to undertake those duties safely and effectively, to help protect themselves, customers, colleagues and rail infrastructure. Existing station staff can also benefit from **NTS training** to help them develop and enhance their NTS further. Post Incident Assessments work with station staff has clearly shown us how safety incidents can occur when station employees have NTS shortfalls."

If you would like to know more about NTS or how they can be used with train dispatchers or other safety critical roles, then contact us at admin@theopc.co.uk or call us on 01923 23 46 46.



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