

Collaboration and freedom to grow – life at AECOM

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As the rail industry navigates how it will deliver schemes in the new post-pandemic era of hybrid working, employees at one firm can already demonstrate how employer flexibility supports better outcomes for both staff and clients.

It was back in 2018 that AECOM adopted its philosophy known as Freedom to Grow. In a nutshell, it means that if an employee's working pattern or style works for them, their team and their clients, then it works for AECOM.

Freedom to Grow is applied throughout the company, including rail, where some of its largest streams of work in the UK include the Southern Rail Systems Alliance, where AECOM is working collaboratively with Network Rail and Colas to provide integrated delivery of the development, design and construction of track renewals for both plain line and switches and crossings. In addition, the Alliance undertakes associated survey, site investigations, drainage, traction power, signalling, electrification and platform works.

Through the combination of Freedom to Grow and the opportunity to work on major rail projects which give employees a wealth of experience and the opportunity to gain broad expertise, AECOM believes that those

joining its rail division will be able to enjoy a long and fulfilling career.

In addition, it believes the experience and expertise employees gain benefits the client too.



Paul Belle

Paul Belle is AECOM's professional head of engineering management, specialising in rail bridges and structures. "The great thing about an alliance," he said, "is the ability to work with our clients and bring our expertise to the fore.

"Our clients are very experienced and very knowledgeable, whether that is in signalling, civil engineering or design, but it is all about bringing those various elements together.

"We deliberately named ourselves the Southern Rail Systems Alliance because we are not just looking at track - we are looking to make the whole railway more efficient and to get more from our intervention.

"We look at a situation in the round, then we submit our proposals to our clients. We seek to make their money go as far as possible, by working with people that we know well and with whom we have excellent collaborative arrangements, so there are no conflicts and no worries about contractual arrangements and obligations - we just get the job done."

Working in an alliance with other organisations enables all parties to that alliance to increase their breadth of understanding of the engineering lifecycle whilst developing their discipline expertise which AECOM employees benefit from directly, and the industry at large benefits through the raising of the skill base.

"Fast turn-around, high volume work means people coming into AECOM have the ability to upskill themselves in various areas very quickly because there's always an opportunity to re-join a project and to retrace an activity to reinforce learning," Paul said.

"Working with AECOM on the Alliance is a fantastic opportunity to accelerate your career."

AECOM is certainly doing its bit to train young engineers. Every year, it brings on a couple of hundred

young people across the sectors; “a mix of graduates and apprentices,” said Susan Evans, rail, bridges and structures director at AECOM, “but in rail, I would say the majority are graduates.”

Being in an alliance helps in other ways. AECOM’s design team welcome secondments from their alliance partners, and similarly AECOM’s young engineers get on the ground experience on renewals and construction sites.

“It’s very important that designers don’t just sit in offices, not really understanding the real world in which our designs are to be implemented,” Paul stated. “We proactively encourage people to go out and see how things are built, and then bring that experience back to make their designs better.”

Of course, AECOM’s work doesn’t solely revolve around the Southern Rail Systems Alliance. The company is also working on other projects – the reopening of the Northumberland line, for example. Here AECOM is working with Northumberland County Council, the Department for Transport and Network Rail. Designers from the York and Glasgow offices have been out on site, walking the route and clarifying details, which will make their final designs more relevant and easier to build.



Quality of life

The ability for AECOM designers to get out on site and see things for themselves is just part of the company’s Freedom to Grow philosophy that has stood it in good stead in recent years.

Many were working from home for part of the week even before COVID-19 hit – used to working digitally and collaborating online where needed. This enabled the firm to give greater assurance of continuity of delivery to clients during the pandemic, especially because a hybrid working IT infrastructure was already in place.

There has been a particular focus on employee health and wellbeing during the pandemic, because although AECOM is rightly proud of the resilience of its staff during this time, it recognised that people’s lockdown experience will vary greatly, and as an employer it needed to support staff as much as possible and encouraged take up of Freedom to Grow.

Even taking exercise during lockdown, going out for a walk or a run at lunchtime, can all add to the quality of life and the effectiveness of the work being undertaken. Other examples of ways staff use Freedom to Grow might be someone who worships on a particular weekday or takes time out during the day for caring responsibilities.





Susan Evans

All staff are granted two days' worth of Social Value hours per year - most famously these have been used to develop the foundations for the memorial to the battle of Saragarhi in Wolverhampton that was unveiled in September 2021; others have used it for community work such as painting the changing rooms at a junior football club and organising the distribution of Christmas presents to children from low-income families.

"It's about coming up with something that benefits the individual because it helps them make their day work for them," Susan explained, "whether that's getting in the exercise or dealing with a personal commitment.

"Obviously, we need to make sure that we are doing the right thing by our clients and supporting the business, but we also need to make sure it works for our employees."