

Engaging women in rail is important for tackling the talent crisis

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*Lorna Gibson, training director at **QTS Group**, talks about how engaging women is crucial to ensuring bright minds continue to work in the rail sector.*

There's an ongoing talent vacuum across the rail industry caused by an ageing workforce and a lack of young people joining the sector. Research by City & Guilds and the National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR) anticipates that the talent crisis will escalate significantly in the coming years, with up to 120,000 additional workers needed over the next five to ten years.

Rail leaders are continually looking for solutions to the talent problem, and one such method that could prove effective is to tackle the gender bias that plagues the industry and encourage more women to consider careers in the sector.

Engaging more women in rail could make the sector more valuable and successful, but we will not get there without reviewing our current processes and actioning where we fall short. The sector isn't well equipped to make women feel welcome, included and comfortable, and this must adapt to make the industry an equal place for all workers regardless of gender.

Making essential preparations

The rail industry will not attract and retain a female workforce if it is not ready for one. At present, women are likely to face challenges in the industry that men don't, such as ill-fitting personal protective equipment (PPE), limited bathroom facilities and a lack of family-friendly working patterns.

Diversity is an essential part of success. If the industry is made up of workers from the same backgrounds and social groups with comparable experiences, we risk making the sector one-dimensional. Hiring the same type of people often elicits the same response, whereas a better mix of employees is essential to make the industry more progressive and knowledgeable.

There are steps that businesses can be taking immediately to make the industry more gender-inclusive, and companies must look for ways to enable flexibility to engage more women. For example, flexible working hours and remote working options are likely to make the industry more attractive for those with families.

Onsite facilities must also be overhauled to ensure everyone has access to the appropriate working conditions to do a job well. Appropriate and inclusive PPE and inclusive bathroom facilities that are fully equipped for women, are among some of the very basic preparations that must be incorporated on sites before trying to actively recruit more women.

Investing in young people

Many young people have preconceived ideas about what it's like to work within rail and industry leaders must tackle these misconceptions head-on to share the many benefits that the sector boasts, including the vast variety of roles available, the longevity of rail careers, financial security, travel opportunities and progression plans.

Moreover, industry professionals and businesses must aim to get in front of female students to encourage engagement in rail careers typically considered for men such as engineering, construction management, quantity surveying and more.

Additionally, more innovative methods to engage young people should be considered. For example, **QTS Group** has recently partnered with East Ayrshire Council to create Scotland's first Rail Skills Academy, which aims to help combat the skills shortage and lack of diversity in the rail industry by introducing a pipeline of diverse new talent into the industry.

With over 48% of railway workers aged 50 or over and women making up just 16% of the current workforce, immediate action such as this, which goes beyond standard recruitment practices, is key to creating a knowledgeable, diverse and qualified workforce for the future. It will also allow young people to gain qualifications, competencies and experience to progress in careers in a thriving industry.

Inspiring a new generation

Despite the gender bias within rail, there are some incredibly successful women in senior roles and it's

important to communicate and celebrate these successes to inspire younger generations. Companies must be vocal about the work of existing female employees so that other women – both inside and outside of that organisation – can feel inspired.

There are also some fantastic organisations, such as Women in Rail Scotland and Women into Construction that businesses should support and promote to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to making their workforces, and the industry as a whole, more diverse.

By hiring people from different backgrounds and regions and providing them with exciting career opportunities, we can help to ensure that future rail projects can succeed, while also creating even more jobs and promoting positive socioeconomic change.