

Women share their career journeys in rail

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Women from rail organisations across the network shared their experiences of working in rail. Here is just a snapshot of inspiring stories from across our industry.

From catering crew to train driver

On International Women's Day, [Hull Trains](#) has highlighted the experience of Lucy Rahman, who made the leap from catering crew to professional rail driver.

Never in her wildest dreams did Lucy Rahman think that one day she would make the leap from catering team member to train driver.

The Hull local had only joined the on-board team at Hull Trains on a temporary basis in 2010, serving refreshments to passengers. Now, 12 years later, she is the one in the driving seat having recently qualified as a professional driver.

On [International Women's Day](#), Lucy has reflected on a remarkable journey whilst encouraging other females to consider a career on the railways.

“Did I think that one day I would be driving a train? Never!” laughed Lucy, “I am not going to lie, I didn’t dream of driving trains as a youngster. I kind of fell into my first role at Hull Trains and never thought of it as a long-term career. But it’s a great company to work for, no two days are the same and you really feel as though you are making a contribution to the community.

“A lot of females go into roles in the railway, and I would recommend it to anyone. I think there’s a false perception from the outside that the industry is male-dominated. I can only talk about here at Hull Trains, but being a woman has never been an issue. In the years I have been here, I have been promoted from on-board host, to manager, and now train driver so there are so many opportunities to progress.”

Lucy isn’t alone in driving trains: 33% of drivers on the Hull Trains books are currently female. This is in addition to 64% of women on-board managers.

Driving is a challenge at the best of times, yet Lucy had the further complication of her learning being disrupted on more than one occasion due to Covid-19.

David Gibson, managing director, said: “Lucy’s story is fabulous, and I applaud her on her achievement. However, this kind of story isn’t unique at Hull Trains. We are proud of the opportunities we afford to all of our colleagues, and this explains why so many stay with us for such a long time.

“Our business has always been committed to enabling pathways for women in our industry which is evidenced with the 49% female split in the workforce, a statistic that we are extremely proud about.”

Working in a male dominated industry

Lisa Varney, route asset and systems integration manager for Network Rail has worked in the industry for 21 years – not bad for someone who initially joined as a data entry temp, for Balfour Beatty in Romford, as a stop gap after completing her degree and working in IT finance.

Lisa, said: “I only worked three days a week, but the atmosphere and flexibility after working in the West End just caught me. I completed my tasks and offered support to my finance and commercial colleagues and after a short period, I asked the finance director for a role within the finance department.”

Lisa has supported both operations and maintenance whilst in finance and has worked with all three delivery units where rail works are coordinated.

One of the things Lisa is very grateful to the rail industry for is the flexibility it offers. Lisa explains, “The rail industry allowed me to work flexibly around my two sons. I’ve had various flexible working patterns for the last 17 years including reduced hours, compressed weeks and the ability to work from home. My sons are now at an age where they need less support and I wanted to progress my career.

“My current role is perfect for me, anyone who knows me, will know I like to be involved and this role has links to all aspects of the engineering team, including asset condition data quality, funding decisions, CP7 work bank co-ordination, interface between deliverers, maintenance and the team, maintenance target setting and one of my favourites, being a line manger to the engineering graduates. It’s a great role and

one that I'm able to continue learning about the business in."

Lisa's one piece of advice for someone thinking of joining Network Rail is, "Go for it! It's a great place to work with lots of opportunities to progress and if you chose to have children, the flexible working available is well established."

Fatima Noor is a project manager for integrated planning, and her role mainly focuses on the integration of asset renewals projects, including enhancements.

Fatima says, "As a black woman with a distinctive ethnic name, I'm cognisant of the fact that my CV would get overlooked based on just my name in any industry within the UK. Being a woman and black in the railway was tough when I started out in 2005. Behaviour towards women in the workplace was atrocious (particularly in front line/operations from my experience). Improvement in this area within the railway is evident today. I had to prove myself to hiring managers to get ahead, more than just a glossy CV and experience. I put myself forward for any relevant secondments, networked within the industry and volunteered to support employee networks, to broaden my skill set."

Fatima has this advice for helping to achieve equality; "Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. What I mean by that is ask the uncomfortable question. Apart from changing policies to meet the equality standards expected from a large organisation, it's the little changes in a person's behaviour every day that adds up. For example, today, if you come across something that doesn't feel right to you, question the person or group. Every shift or meeting is an opportunity to support this change within our industry."

Fatima has this advice for anyone considering a career in the rail industry; "There are many opportunities for women within Network Rail. There are policies in place to support career growth, higher learning opportunities and much more. Also, it's worth mentioning that whilst working for Network Rail I have come across several supportive men who are dedicated to equality for everyone, and some of these men have been pivotal to my development over the years."

Emma Askam-Johns, programme manager, is currently working for both the passenger strategy team and the performance team, which means collaboration is a huge part of her role.

In Emma's first office role working for a Japanese trading company, she was expected to make the coffee, do the photocopying and it was assumed she would be better at typing than men.

Emma explains, "I changed their expectations by not drinking coffee, refusing the photocopying course and proving myself at the job in hand, so that I was quickly promoted. The hard truth though is that as a young English woman in a Japanese company, the bias at the time was too great to be viewed as an equal, so I accepted the things that I could not change and moved on to other companies where I would be valued for who I am."

Emma says, "I'm proud of completely changing my career direction after 20 years in finance, retraining in change programme management and retuning those analytical and management skills into performance improvement and collaboration."

“Network Rail supported me to adapt my career path without compromising who I am. I believe you can be a strong businesswoman whilst still being loyal and sincere, that you can be assertive without being aggressive and that you can be emotional without being weak.

“I want to show my sons that we should try and start with a blank canvas when we meet people and build our perceptions based on who they prove to be, not on preconceptions. I tell my sons every day that they can be whoever they want to be and that they should treat others how they want to be treated.”

Anyone interested in a career with Network Rail should visit <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/careers/> for more information about the roles available, the skills we are looking for and how to apply.

Breaking the bias

Kathryn O’Brien, Customer Experience Director at TransPennine Express (TPE) said: “We have worked hard to break the stereotypes of traditional roles within the rail industry, and we continue to make huge progress in developing a more diverse workforce.

“I’m proud to say that we have more woman in senior roles than ever before, and we are continually developing new schemes to encourage woman to consider a career in rail.”

Through its specialist apprenticeship and graduate schemes, last autumn TPE welcomed 14 apprentices and three graduates, a third of which were women. This is a figure mirrored within TPE’s overall recruitment in the past 12 months, with women making up 35 per cent of new employees.

Shannon Pilkington, a control room apprentice based in Manchester is one of those using the scheme to break into the rail industry.

Shannon said: “The apprenticeship is a two-year scheme which includes completing a Level Three in Business Administration and the Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE). My role involves spending time in the control room, developing my skills in the different roles within the department by shadowing colleagues and completing different tasks.

“So far, the experience has been amazing, and it has really helped with my confidence. Everyone at TPE is very supportive and all the apprentices are going through the same experiences together.”

Alicja Zdobylak is a management graduate based within the operations department. She joined TPE in September 2021 as a part of the graduate scheme which gives university students an introduction to the rail industry.

Alicja said: “Since starting at TPE I have worked on the frontline and within an office environment. The exposure I am getting allows me to see the business – and wider industry – as a whole, rather than focusing on just one department. This allows me to make smarter business decisions, which will not only help me but, in the long run, will help the business grow and increase customer satisfaction.”

As well as encouraging new women into the business, TPE also supports existing colleagues to develop

their skills, retrain where necessary, and take steps to achieve their career goals. TPE offers inclusive career development with its Step Up and Step Forward programme that supports increased female representation in management grade roles.

Lisa Yemm, a resourcing administrator, joined TPE in 2008. Lisa started her rail career as a cleaner for Carlisle Support Services at Manchester Airport Station. Lisa then moved on to work as a cleaner at The Hub, Huddersfield, TPE's training centre, where she was offered a secondment to work as an administrator for the Learning and Development team. Lisa's career in the railway then further developed when TPE's human resources director nominated her to do the Step Up and Step Forward Programme.

Lisa said: "I work with an amazing team that supports, encourages and gives me the confidence to believe in myself. They always push me to do my best! The highlight of my career would be the human resources director believing in me and giving me the opportunity to do the secondment within Learning and Development."

But it's not just those looking for their first role in the industry who benefit from TPE's commitment to breaking the bias. The rail operator is also championing career development for those already in the business.

Emma Teale, recently promoted to Head of Customer Insights and Improvement, said: "My recent promotion is the absolute highlight of my career so far. Previously, as Customer Experience Manager, I was very lucky to be able to learn a lot that put me in a great position to further my career. I had a great mentor - and cheerleader - within the business and this helped me massively.

"I'm really excited for the next stage in my career and making a success of the role. I'm also very lucky to be surrounded by an excellent team."