

Mpro5: It's time for rail companies to get smarter with data

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*Toby Hawkins, Sales Director at software solutions provider **mpro5**, discusses why the rail industry needs to wise up and make the most of data.*

The rail network is awash with data. There are systems measuring everything you could possibly compute – from ticket sales and toilet cleaning to punctuality and passenger satisfaction. Use this data smartly, and you have the power to transform your train operating company (TOC).

But here's the catch; to use the data, you've first got to get your hands on it, and with the way many TOCs are organised, that's not always as simple as it sounds.

What's the magic password?

So much of this rich, wonderful data is still stuck in silos, and where there are silos, there are gatekeepers. The people who manage and 'own' the data aren't always too keen to share it.

This has a lot to do with the old rail franchise model. The short length of franchise contracts stifled long-

term thinking, so TOCs would focus instead on specific, short-term goals. They'd deploy an array of tools and processes designed to meet those very defined aims, with very little thought to what may lie beyond.

Over time, this has created a fragmented tech landscape. Systems rarely work together or talk to one another, and each department collects and stores data in its own way – which makes reporting a real headache.

Let's say you want to crunch some numbers on station maintenance. The data you need could be scattered all over the place, from digital tools and databases (if you're lucky), to email threads, paper records and old-style logbooks.

Gathering what you need won't be easy. And what if someone with access to a key bit of data is on holiday? By the time they're back, weeks might have passed – and the stats you needed may no longer be relevant.

Pulling it all together

Imagine how much better it'd be if everything were more joined up. If all the data from all your business units were gathered and stored in one central, digital hub, where you could access on demand – any time of day or night.

With that kind of bird's-eye view of all your TOC's data, you have a clear picture of what's working, what's costing you time and money, and where you need extra resources and investment.

More than that, you can compare and understand trends across your entire business. You can start to make connections that wouldn't have been possible before and observe how results in one department affect performance in another.

For instance, one day you might notice a spike in revenue-protection activity on a certain stretch of track. You might assume your inspectors are just having a particularly productive day catching the fare-dodgers. However, when you check your central, digital hub, and look at data from stations in the area, it tells you several ticket machines are down at one of the main stops on the route, and it shows that footfall around the ticket office is unusually high.

You join the dots and realise it's not a spike in deliberate fare evasion. It's simply a case of honest passengers being unable to use ticket machines, and the ticket office being too busy to help them. In a couple of clicks or taps, you can check if the faulty ticket machines have been reported, and if they haven't, you can assign an urgent task to a maintenance person and get the problem sorted.

Change hurts – but not as much as the alternative

Why would anyone object to centralising and digitising rail data in this way? Well, because people who work for TOCs are busy, for a start. Few would relish the idea of adding a major change project to their to-do list.

But you have to ask: why are they so busy? Would they be stretched so thin if their processes were more efficient? And if they didn't have to spend so much time gathering, processing and reporting on data?

Putting a central, digital system in place needn't be an all-consuming IT project that drags on for years. It's something you can tackle piece by piece, department by department – starting where the impact is greatest – like train presentation, for instance.

You'll soon see how the data-driven approach improves efficiency, reduces costs and increases service quality (SQ) scores. As word spreads about your positive results, ears will prick up in other areas of the business.

Momentum will build. More departments will get on board. And before you know it, you'll be wondering how you managed for so long without a centralised data hub.

Some may fear and resist a change like this, but here's the thing: the Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail is coming, and the entire sector is changing – whether people like it or not. Rail companies will be penalised if they don't hit their performance targets, particularly around Standard Qualifications, and one of the biggest barriers to hitting those targets, as things stand, is access to SQ data.

So TOCs have a choice: embrace technology and digitise their data to thrive in the new age of rail. Or cling to old ways of doing things – and risk being left behind. Which way will you go?