

Shaping the future of an evolving industry

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Signet Solutions' managing director Andy Knight was appointed president of the Institution of Railway Signal Engineers (IRSE) in April 2022. Six months on, he discusses the importance of the train control industry's professional institution, reflects on his achievements so far, and looks ahead to the second half of his presidential year

When I was named president of the IRSE earlier this year, I certainly didn't foresee the challenges 2022 had in store for our industry. Lockdown measures were easing, and I'd anticipated a relatively smooth start to my tenure. However, my second presidential lecture coincided with widespread rail strikes, while IRSE's annual dinner took place during a heatwave that resulted in speed restrictions and service cancellations.

Luckily, we were able to work around these issues, bringing the train control industry together for a series of successful events – including a week-long international convention in Glasgow. And, while there are some challenges for which we cannot plan, my priorities as president remain clear – to support the rail industry as it evolves, and to ensure that the IRSE educates and upskills its membership with a growing range of qualifications, resources, and events.

A professional institution

The IRSE is the signalling industry's professional institution, training, supporting, and connecting all those who work in railway signalling and telecommunications, train control, traffic management and allied professions. I joined as a young signalling engineer, and have worked closely with the organisation for many years – even running subsidised workshops for members. Latterly, I made my way along its 'presidential path', becoming junior and senior vice president.

As managing director of Signalling Solutions (which delivers bespoke railway signalling courses and training programmes), I am passionate about professional development. Becoming president of the IRSE was an opportunity to channel this passion, and to give back to the industry in which I've proudly worked for 44 years. Indeed, only by properly educating, upskilling, and supporting its engineers, can we ensure that railway systems remain safe and efficient.

A global organisation

As the 98th president of the IRSE, my focus is 'shaping the future'. In practice, this means striving to make the institution more inclusive and representative. I believe that our offering needs to move with the times, reflecting the changing needs of our 5000-strong membership.

We are embracing technology, and already hold many of our meetings on Teams (a measure brought in during the COVID-19 pandemic). The IRSE is a truly global organisation, with significant sections in Australasia and Asia, the Pacific region, France, Ireland, Holland, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. Meeting remotely means that members from around the globe can be in attendance, and we schedule using a 'world clock'. The first council meeting I chaired was at around midnight UK time. We are also changing the way we elect in a bid to better represent this global membership.

Ted talks for the signalling industry

I was keen to review, not just IRSE's governance, but its content, focusing on how people search for, access, and engage with information today. To complement our traditional presidential programme of technical papers, I have introduced a series of ten-minute online IRSE 'Ted Talks', known as IRSE10.

The first IRSE10 video, 'Panic in the Exam Room', was launched earlier this month. It provides useful tips on the IRSE professional exam – particularly, curveball questions that might catch learners off guard. I hope that, for busy engineers, this streamlined content will prove invaluable. In the future, we plan to explore different platforms and mediums – including podcasts.

I am also keen to ensure that the next generation of signalling professionals can access IRSE's networking events. This year, 10 bursary winners were sponsored to attend the convention. It was a privilege to meet these young people – most of whom, were fresh from university, and embarking on a career in the rail industry.

Signet Solutions

Over the coming months, I'll continue to engage with IRSE's growing membership via technical visits, lectures, and trips to sections overseas. Thanks to my capable and dedicated team, I've been able to

balance these presidential responsibilities with the demands of running Signet Solutions. We are a small, agile company, focussing on signalling principles (design, testing, and maintenance) rather than specific systems. This helps to keep things simple. Like IRSE, remote working has enabled us to better serve our global clients – although I will soon combine a presidential trip to Melbourne, Australia, with training in Perth.

The future of signalling

Ultimately, IRSE is committed to bringing this global, and sometimes fragmented, industry together. In addition to offering resources, certified courses, and events, the institution also enables its members to connect with one another; think senior project engineers advising and supporting recent graduates, or designers collaborating to solve problems. It's a time of great change for the wider rail industry, with new systems and digitalisation set to improve passenger experience. Now, more than ever, we must work together, taking pride in our past while looking to the future.

Founded over 21 years ago, Signet Solutions delivers bespoke signalling courses and training programmes. Its areas of expertise include technical training and development, competence assurance, and technical consultancy. To learn more, visit www.signet-solutions.com



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