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Final report

Rail Ambassadors



The future is ours!

Marleen van de Kerkhof & Oscar Vermeij

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2022 has been declared the European Year of Youth, to shine a light on the importance of Europe's youth in building a better future - greener, more inclusive and digital. The rail industry can play an important role in building that future, as it offers the solution to decarbonise transport. The driving force of young people behind sustainability and innovation is of great importance to the rail sector. Without the involvement of youth, the European rail system has little future.

Appointed as the Rail Ambassadors of the European Year of Youth, Marleen van de Kerkhof (on behalf of Railforum and Jonge Veranderaars) and Oscar Vermeij (on behalf of Rail Cargo information Netherlands) have taken every opportunity to highlight the innovative and sustainable nature of the European rail system. With the goal of encouraging young people to choose for a challenging and meaningful job in the rail industry, they've improved the image of the sector. Marleen and Oscar have achieved to maintain the positive momentum for the European railway system created during the European Year of Rail (2021).

Seeking the recommendations of youth, 2022 was a year of meeting, learning, and sharing each other's vision. Based on the events Marleen and Oscar organised and attended with young people across Europe, they have the following findings and recommendations to share:

Sustainability

With the train being the most sustainable mode of motorised transport, rail plays a tremendous role in decarbonising European transport and can make a major contribution to achieving the climate objectives as described in the Green Deal. Europe's rail potential must therefore be unlocked to enable much more rail transport for both passengers and cargo. One of the challenges in this regard is to increase the available capacity of the existing rail infrastructure. This can be achieved, among other things, by accelerating the move to digital, flexible and European capacity management, by working towards international harmonisation in rail management using European standards and by extending freight trains to 740 metres. Furthermore, the competitiveness of rail transport needs to be enhanced by creating a level playing field for all modes.

There is a lot of discussion in national and European politics about the challenges of climate change and the decarbonisation of transport. Youth is the driving force behind the policy that has rail at its heart. Without rail, climate-neutral transport will never be achieved. Rail is therefore the future of transport and youth is the future of rail. Where rail is the driver for more sustainable and innovative transport, young people are the driver for sustainable innovations in rail.

Young people increasingly feel it is important to contribute to a more sustainable world, so the rail sector should make it more visible how they can do so with innovations in the rail sector. Working in the rail sector is 'green' and meaningful.

Ageing and innovation

In Europe, one-third of the rail workforce is expected to retire in the next five to ten years. The targeted capacity growth for Dutch and European rail transport can therefore not be facilitated with people, but with technology.

The rail sector is struggling with too few new recruits. Understaffing of rail contractors is leading to less track maintenance, which causes more failures and decreases the reliability of the rail infrastructure. The rail sector needs to embrace digital technologies to deal with the ageing workforce and growing staff shortages while increasing the efficiency, safety, and capacity of Europe's rail infrastructure. Working with the latest digital technologies, such as Internet of Things, robotisation, and the digital twin, is not only interesting for the new generation of mechanics, but is also necessary to help rail contractors cope with more work while facing a shrinking workforce and to modernise the rail infrastructure, which consists of ageing technologies.

Young people do not find it attractive to work at night and irregularly. Working at night is also shown to be bad for one's health. The rail sector must therefore ensure that work is better spread over the day. After all, performing track maintenance during the day, between trains running, can be done in a safe way with the use of already available technologies. To attract new talent, it is important to reintroduce single-track work in the Netherlands.

Image

Many young people still think of train drivers or mechanics when they picture a job in the rail sector. There is indeed a huge shortage of workers for these jobs, but it is also important to highlight the diversity of the job landscape in the rail sector. Fifty percent of job vacancies are now about digitalisation. The industry needs to keep the current workforce up to date with the new digital technologies.

The sector needs to change its image, because working in the rail sector nowadays often requires digital skills through the use of the latest technologies. Rail offers a highly innovative working environment. It is a fantastic world where old technologies, thanks to the connection with the most modern developments, are contributing to yet another sustainable industrial revolution. Deploying new technologies makes working in railways more attractive for the new generation of engineers. To connect with young people, who are more data-minded, it is important to make moves in the standardisation of data interfaces quickly. This will enable the rail sector to become data-driven and attract youth.

The railways are an uncharted territory for many young people. Therefore, it is important to start recruitment early by presenting the wonderful world of railways at colleges and schools. The labour shortage is so severe across the entire rail sector, that the industry should organise a joint campaign with young and diverse role models to increase the visibility of the sector and to emphasise the innovative and sustainable character of rail.

Next year's European Year of Skills offers an important chance to keep the rail industry in the spotlight for the new generation. The sector should seize this opportunity and pay special attention to attracting talent by showing how challenging and varied work in rail is.

Diversity and inclusiveness

Women are under-represented in the rail sector: 21% of Europe's railway's workforce is female. Despite the image of the railways as a man's world, there are lots of job opportunities for young women, because rail technology is just as suited to women as it is to men. It is also important to investigate on regulations that exclude workers based on age. Employees who wish to continue working beyond retirement age should be enabled to do so. In addition, it should be possible to get an internship with a rail contractor before the age of 18. And what is good to know is that apprenticeship programmes for people with residence permits at rail operators and contractors are proving to be successful for recruiting new staff.

In conclusion, the rail sector needs to reach out to everyone to join the rail industry and use the driving force of young people. There is a challenging and meaningful job available for everybody in this diverse sector. The rail sector is facing a structural shortage of personnel and this will prevent us from harnessing the amazing potential in terms of sustainability and innovative strength of the European rail system. Given the urgent climate issues, this cannot be condoned. Rail is the future of transport, and youth is the future of rail. The future is ours!



Marleen van de Kerkhof



Oscar Vermeij