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# Rail Professional

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Women in rail | Clare Burles



## Under-represented but fighting for inclusion

There are a number of ways companies can help encourage more women to consider rail as a career, the first is to tackle perceptions of rail which are often outdated, says **Clare Burles**

In recent years in the UK there has been an increasing focus on women in STEM industries, and more importantly the lack of women on boards and in senior roles. This is an area that is improving slowly, with many companies now making a conscious effort to work towards an equal workforce, although of course there is still a long way to go. Despite this focus on encouraging women to aim for these top roles, the rail industry is an area which is still lagging behind on its approach to inclusion and diversity and



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**Where the challenge begins**

The challenge of ensuring that underrepresented groups such as women are being included is one that we need to overcome for it to prosper and become even more dynamic.

A Women in Rail report last year showed that just 16.4 per cent of the workforce within UK rail is female. The majority of these roles are customer facing, meaning there is a large skills gap in engineering roles, only four per cent of women are currently working in this area.

**Importance of plugging the gap**

There is a high importance in making sure this issue is being addressed. From an economic stance, it doesn't make sense to rule out 50 per cent of the talent pool; the skills gap is impacting the effectiveness of the industry and although there is a promising future for rail, we simply can't reach the full potential without employing the best from a comprehensive range of candidates.

A further case for the inclusion of women in rail and diversity is the clear fact that a diverse workforce is a stronger one. Forbes reports that diversity is vital for a business to have the ability to adapt and

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innovate in an evolving and quick paced world. The mix of opinions, strengths and weaknesses, as well as a different approaches to tasks, provides businesses with a strong foundation that leads to a better understanding of customers – and ultimately better results.

**Education will fix perception**  
There are a number of ways that companies can help encourage more women to consider

rail as a viable career option for them. The first way is to tackle the perceptions of rail which are often outdated. Research shows that many young girls are not choosing STEM subjects at a young age and therefore continuing to reject subjects as they move further through their education. One way of improving this is ensuring there is a clear representation of the industry and this would include highlighting that there is an abundance of roles available to women;

there are expansive opportunities that are not limited to one discipline.

Another proven way of improving the take up of STEM subjects is through real life testimonials from other women who have succeeded in the industry. The UK rail industry can take a leaf out of Sweden's book; they promote engineering as the elite industry, many people view working in engineering as success at the highest level. By using role models to help convey the message of our rail industry being vital to us as a country, more young girls will consider STEM subjects when making vital decisions about what careers they want to pursue. The importance of improving the gender gap in rail isn't something that has gone ignored by the industry; DB Cargo has recently announced that they have launched a Women in Management project.

At Virgin Trains we have been focused on promoting railway careers among schools. We held an open day as part of Young Rail Week and have been much more active in talking openly about the roles and opportunities available, raising awareness and hopefully demystifying the perception that certain roles are only for men.

Clare Burles is people director at Angel Trains