



Women in Rail Trustee Story Spotlight – Neil Robertson CEO – NSAR (National Skills Academy for Rail)



Data, Dreams and a Dash of Fringe Comedy

I've spent most of my career working on people, skills, and the future of work. For 10 years I've been the CEO of the National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR). At NSAR, our role focuses on skills development, training, and workforce planning for the rail sector in the UK. My work is not only on addressing the current and future skills challenges, but also on ensuring that rail remains an attractive, inclusive, and sustainable career choice for all. These priorities naturally align with the mission of Women in Rail in creating a more diverse and representative rail industry.

Before NSAR, my career was wonderfully varied, teaching at Edinburgh University, working with the British Institute of Innkeeping, various roles in government departments that all in one way or another, were about people. Looking back, it makes sense, I've always been fascinated by what helps people learn, grow, and succeed and I thoroughly enjoy working hard to make this happen.

And yes, I do still say, that some of the best networking happens in the pub and women should feel absolutely comfortable to be in that space too. Though I'll add it's the conversations that count, connections made over a coffee, a glass of wine or yes even a pint can open doors you never imagined.

Why Women in Rail Matters

When I joined Women in Rail as a Trustee, I knew I'd be supporting an organisation with purpose. What I didn't expect was just how much energy the team and the board would bring. The room buzzes with ideas, passion, and determination. Honestly, if every board I sat on had this much life in it, we'd all get a lot more done.

Women in Rail matters to me because it's not about words, it's about action. You can feel the difference it makes. Every time I am with the team, I walk away inspired. It really does make me want to do more.

For me, this isn't just about equality for equality's sake. It's about building a stronger, more successful industry. Rail needs to reflect the society it serves, and right now, that means making sure more women not only join the industry but stay, progress, and thrive. And the good news, it's happening. The numbers have improved and indeed dare I say are shifting. You can see change in the data, and you can feel it in the culture. That's incredibly exciting.

Collaboration and Brand Strength

One of the things I've always believed in is collaboration. Women in Rail isn't an island, it's a movement. The more we connect with other organisations and widen our networks, both in the UK and internationally, the stronger our brand becomes. Collaboration allows us to share information, learn from others, and develop together.

An area of focus for me in my trustee role has been on developing strong international relationships that open opportunities for sharing best practice across borders and create opportunities for our members. Rail is a global industry, innovations in technology, operations, and workforce strategies are constantly being developed worldwide. By connecting Women in Rail with international partners, I hope to bring fresh perspectives and learning. Countries are at different stages in their journey towards equality, and by learning from each other's successes and setbacks, the rail sector as a whole can move forward more quickly and effectively. For example, exploring how other nations have increased female representation in technical roles, or how they've built inclusive workplace cultures, provides valuable insights that can be applied in the UK and beyond.

I really do believe building these cross-border connections not only strengthens Women in Rail's voice globally, but also helps to raise the profile of the UK rail industry as a leader in championing diversity and inclusion. We've seen interest from Asia, Australia, America and Europe so the opportunities are so exciting, I look forward to sharing more information in this space as it happens.

And yes, I have a dream. Perhaps that makes me the Martin Luther King of rail. But it's true. My dream is to host a virtual worldwide Women in Rail conference. Imagine thousands of women and allies, all in one space, sharing knowledge and supporting each other. The scale of that energy would be unstoppable.

Opportunities in Rail - The Future: Data, Digital, and Drive

Right now, I see opportunities in rail more clearly than ever. The industry is changing fast, digitalisation, decarbonisation, automation, and with change comes new roles, new skills, and new possibilities.

Women are brilliant at so many of the roles rail needs, project management, systems thinking, leadership, data analysis, digital design. These are growth areas, and women should absolutely see rail as a place where they can build an exciting career.

I'm a data person at heart. Evidence matters, because it proves change is real and points the way forward. At NSAR and with Women in Rail, I've seen how powerful the numbers can be. When the data shows improvement, you can feel the energy lift. It motivates us to do more, shows us where progress is being made and where challenges remain. And when you can see the numbers moving in the right direction, it's incredibly powerful.

Looking to the future, I see three things as absolutely critical, data, digital, and the pound. Data tells us where we are. Digital opens up new skills and roles. And investment determines how fast we can go. But underpinning all of that is people. And we need more women to bring their energy and drive into this industry.

My advice

Network. Have confidence. Connect. Women in Rail is brilliant at supporting all three. It gives practical tools, mentoring, and visibility. But most importantly, it creates a community where you are not alone. I always tell people, sometimes just being in the room is half the battle. Women in Rail helps make sure you are in the right room, with the right people, at the right time.

That's why I love the Women in Rail regional groups. They're a perfect example of energy in action. You walk into a regional event and you see the future of rail being built in front of you. I'm also a big supporter of the returners programme, because helping women re-enter the industry with confidence is one of the most practical, powerful things we can do.

Women in Rail is here to speed things up. Without it, change would take decades. With it, we can change the industry in just a few years.

A Call to Action

So here's my call to action, get involved. Women in Rail exists to advance women, to influence policy, and to change the face of the industry. But it only works if people step forward.

Be part of it. Mentor someone. Join a regional group. Share your data skills. Support a returner. Give something back. Because every action counts, and together, we are unstoppable.

And finally, don't be afraid to push yourself, last week, I found myself on stage at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I wasn't entirely sure how I'd ended up there, but I loved it. The lights, the crowd, the applaud, I came away buzzing.

It reminded me of something I now often say, "***Growth happens when you put yourself out there.***" Whether it's standing on a stage, speaking up in a meeting, or applying for a promotion, the moment you step forward is the moment things change.

And that's exactly what Women in Rail does, it gives women in our industry the tools, the confidence, and the community to step forward. To be visible. To lead. And to thrive.

That's why Women in Rail matters to me. Because it's not just changing careers, it's changing the future of our industry. And I couldn't be prouder to play my part.

Neil

For more information on Women in Rail, please visit: www.womeninrail.org