

From steam to super-speed on the same old tracks

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European trains have gone from steam age to super speeds, but the track has changed little since George Stephenson's *Locomotion* shuttled from Stockton to Darlington more than 180 years ago. But this does not mean that the line, or assorted bits of railway infrastructure, is immune from the project to harmonise European railways.

Traditionally, the ideal network has been one where any train can run anywhere at any time. But in practice this has never existed and is increasingly being challenged. European railway managers are calling for recognition of the different roles that railways play, with different tracks to suit them.

Differentiated networks

In a vision of railways in 2035, EIM, the European rail infrastructure managers association, foresees "differentiated networks". These would include a multi-purpose core network – the main network for conventional trains – plus dedicated lines for high-speed trains, heavy freight trains, regional, rural services and tramways.

But this will not eliminate the traditional conflict between passenger and freight trains over repair schedules, timetables and resources. Should a late passenger train take priority over a punctual freight train? Should repairs be done at night to avoid inconvenience for passengers, or in the day to avoid slowing down freight? The European Commission thinks that freight has been the second-class service for too long. Last year it proposed that the rail network should give more consideration to freight and is currently consulting on how this might be achieved. The consultation is likely to lead to rules that govern pan-European traffic. But black-and-white favouritism is unlikely: the rules are most likely to give priority to different types of train at different times of the day.

Priority rules

Michael Robson, secretary-general of EIM, supports the development of priority rules. But he says that progress in cutting repair times has helped to alleviate this "classic conflict". He says that average line closures have fallen from 50 to 28 hours in recent years. But the EU has not yet reached the standard of the time-conscious Swiss, who complete repairs in an average of eight hours. They save time and money by, for instance, pre-fabricating switches before installing them on the line.

Industry pushes for stock numbers

Two approaches have been taken to cleaning up wagon identification issues, writes **Jennifer Rankin**

Train enthusiasts, well known for jotting down engine numbers, will soon face a new set of railway barcodes for their notebooks.

The debate on wagon numbering has been a live issue in the industry for several years and is close to resolution through a combination of EU action and industry-driven initiatives.

Currently, the European Union system for identifying and registering rolling stock is messy. Countries have diverse approaches: a mixture

of paper and IT-based systems exists with no clear agreement on how many numbers are needed to identify wagons. This is in contrast to the ordered system of vehicle registration for other modes of transport. Cars and aircraft have two identification numbers, a registration number or tail number, as well as a permanent serial number inscribed on the chassis.

The European Railway Agency is in the process of creating a standard format

for train vehicle registration. The agency was set up in 2004 to do the technical heavy-lifting on making Europe's railways "interoperable", ie, work across borders. It is developing a database of rolling stock in the EU with a standard format for vehicle registration. But the industry thinks that railway stock needs an extra permanent number (like a car's chassis number) to keep track of ownership.

The global nature of the market in second-hand

rolling stock – old railway cars can travel from the US to Chile, from Europe to Africa – inhibited the European Railway Agency from developing a permanent serial number.

The Rail Working Group, an international industry group, has developed what it claims is a complementary approach. Howard Rosen, a lawyer who chairs the group, argues that unique identifiers will help to identify assets and to track ownership interests as

rolling stock is bought and sold around the world. "It allows operators to identify assets and is also important for insurers taking on liabilities in relation to rail equipment." And Rosen argues that being able to track assets will give certainty to financiers who put money into the railways – an important selling-point in these credit-shrunk times. "In this particular climate nothing could be more important for lenders than certainty. Our timing is extraordinary."

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