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The Next Chapter

Quarterly Insights from The Recruitment Story

'I've spent more than three decades in and around rail, and one thing has always been true: the railway never stands still. But right now, the pace of change feels different. Faster. More layered. More human.'

Across the country, from major rail operators to growing tram and light rail networks, leaders are navigating pressures that didn't exist five or ten years ago. Passenger behaviour has shifted. Politics has become louder. Customer expectations have risen sharply. And the system itself is being reshaped.

This edition of The Next Chapter brings together the themes I'm hearing every day. My aim is simple: to help you see what's coming, strengthen your commercial capability and stay ahead of the talent curve'

Caroline Wilson, Founder & MD, The Recruitment Story

Patterns Are Changing And They're Not Changing Evenly



If you stand on a platform in Manchester, Leeds or Birmingham, you'll see a different railway to the one you'd see in York, Bristol or Edinburgh.

Intercity routes are busy again -

- Commuter lines still feel the impact of hybrid working
- Leisure travel has quietly become the commercial engine
- Regional rail and tram systems rise and fall with local economies



Light rail tells the same story: some networks thrive, others rebuild confidence.

What this means: Leaders must read the small picture, a corridor, a city, a flow of passengers and turn data into decisions.

The next quarter rewards operators with:

- Curious commercial analysts
- Leaders who understand local behaviour
- People who turn data into decisions, not dashboards

Devolution Is Changing the Railway

Mayors and combined authorities are becoming co-authors of the railway story, shaping:

- Service patterns
- Fare structures
- Multi-modal integration
- Customer experience expectations

Light rail shows this clearly, with cities expanding networks and raising standards. Your next hires need to be:

- Politically aware
- Comfortable in public-sector partnership environments
- Skilled at navigating scrutiny
- Confident in shared-accountability systems

The days of “pure operator” thinking are gone.





Reform Is Creating a Capability Gap

Rail reform is a slow, steady shift, roles are changing, responsibilities moving, collaboration becoming essential. Operators are moving from running timetables to shaping the future railway.

Leaders now need to:

- Think commercially in regulated environments
- Understand pricing in leisure-driven markets
- Design propositions across modes
- Work confidently with Network Rail, suppliers and authorities
- Join the dots between rail, tram, bus and active travel

Light rail networks feel this too as cities grow their systems. Being reform-ready matters more than being bid-ready.

Customer Expectations Are Rising

Passengers want a railway that feels simple, human and reliable. They expect:

- Accurate real-time information
- Smooth multi-modal journeys
- Fair pricing
- Clear, confident communication

To deliver this, operators need leaders who can:

- Build customer-centric propositions
- Work cross-functionally in safety-critical environments
- Influence without authority
- Drive cultural change



Light rail has often led the way, agile, integrated, customer-focused.



Other Pressures Shaping Talent Needs

Timetable Stability vs Operational Reality, crew availability, training backlogs, fleet reliability.

Infrastructure Reliability & Shared Accountability, operators judged on what they don't fully control.

Fares Reform & Revenue Protection, pricing psychology, simplification, fraud.

Digital Information & Passenger Trust, fragmented data needs fixing.

Safety Culture & Workforce Modernisation, new tech, IR, frontline trust.

Accessibility & Inclusion, inclusive design is now an expectation.

Sustainability & Decarbonisation, electrification gaps, fleet transition, carbon reporting.

Reputation & Public Confidence, transparency and human-centred service.

What Leaders Need Next

Rail leaders carry responsibility for things they don't fully control. Light rail leaders carry visibility for things the public sees instantly. They need teams who can:

- Interpret small signals in passenger behaviour
- Join the dots across modes, partners and authorities
- Make commercial choices with clarity & influence without authority
- Lead with calm, confidence and humanity

What This Means for You

The market is telling you three things:

- Commercial capability is becoming the biggest differentiator
- Stakeholder navigation is now essential
- You can't wait, the leaders you need are already delivering somewhere else

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