

Safety and compliance

In his keynote speech, new SOE patron Sir Moir Lockhead urged IRTE Conference delegates to focus on compliance and safety in the workplace, if they want business success

In his opening remarks to a room full of delegates at the IRTE Conference 2013, Sir Moir Lockhead – retired chief executive of FirstGroup and recently installed patron of SOE (the Society of Operations Engineers, the umbrella organisation for Institute of Road Transport Engineers) – revealed that the IRTE has been a big and constant part of his life since becoming an apprentice at a bus garage in Darlington, Co Durham in the 1960s. Back then, he was informed by a supervisor that “to be the best in transport engineering you have to qualify as a member of the IRTE – by examination, mind”.

Fast-forward 53 years and that sentiment still rings true. “The SOE is a fantastic organisation and I’m really proud to be part of it,” he stated, reaffirming its foremost roles in informing, mentoring and accrediting engineers and technicians. “At FirstGroup, I encouraged all of our young engineers to join, because, as operations engineers we need the IRTE behind us to help us in influencing every avenue of transport engineering.”

And, for Sir Moir, those absolutely include safety and compliance: both attributes, he insists, that the organisation stands for. “What we must do as operations engineers – as fleet engineers, supervisors and technicians – is make sure that we are safe in every respect. That’s in terms of our vehicles, but also our people and our customers. That means we must also be compliant,” he told the audience. “And compliance represents the minimum acceptable standard, so we should also work to comply at a much higher standard.”

Why is this so critical? “I believe that reinforcing safety is not only important for its own sake, but is also the starting point for improving efficiency, both at the operational and business levels,” he explained. “As engineers, we are in the best place

to look at how we get more productivity out of our people – how to help them work more efficiently – by using new technology, but also by improving, for example, workshop planning.” To make that sustainable, however, requires understanding, attention to detail and a corporate policy founded on safety and compliance. “It is part of a really good business model, so we can make more money, make more profit – because we’re safer, we’re compliant and we’re more efficient.”

Sir Moir also made the point that the size of an organisation shouldn’t make any difference. He reminded delegates that in his own career, he has used the approach way back with his first purchase of Grampian Transport, in Aberdeen, with 200 buses and 500 people. Equally, it was one of the cornerstones for FirstGroup, which, when he retired almost three years ago, employed 130,000 people, running 8,000 buses in the UK, the largest rail network in the UK and 50,000 yellow school buses in North America.

“We had to provide a safe and compliant environment for that massive organisation,” he insisted. How did he do it? “You just have to have good people; they must become members of IRTE; and you have them trained and qualified as part of that organisation. As I’ve said many times, I call it ‘injury prevention’. People in my company must not get hurt. In your own operations the people you employ must not get hurt. They don’t go to work to get hurt, or even worse...”

Harder, faster, safer

“And if you look after them – make them feel safe – they work harder, they’re more productive and they’ve got a better mindset. And that’s good for business. My companies that were the safest were the most profitable: that’s a fact. So safety is good for your staff, it’s good for your customers, and it’s also good for your shareholders.”

Closer to home for most of the delegates, Sir Moir also made it clear that, in his opinion, safety and compliance – coupled with good technicians, properly trained and equipped to make the organisation efficient – also impact vehicle reliability and uptime. “Roadside and repeat failures used to really get to me at FirstGroup. I used to look at them every day, across the whole group. To me, it was important that people weren’t sat at the side of the road in our buses.”

He conceded that his ‘freight’ was rather more likely to complain than the majority of loads delegates might have to deal with in their day-to-day business. “Most of ours were very vocal, particularly if we got it wrong,” he quipped.

On a more serious note, though, he also reasoned that reliability matters whatever or whoever is being transported – not least because wasted time is wasted money and potentially a

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damaged reputation. “So I was absolutely focused on safety and efficiency, and making our people more able to do the job, using the right equipment at the right time.”

Talking of which, Sir Moir was quick to praise the current crop of commercial vehicles, as well as the latest diagnostic tools, designed to assist workshop managers and technicians alike. “I saw equipment at this year’s CV Show that allowed you to diagnose faults in a way that, when I was a young engineer, just couldn’t be done. It would sometimes be a case of third time lucky,” he recalled. “Now you can be right first time, every time.”

However, there is still a key requirement for good technicians and engineers, trained to be able to interpret diagnostic data, he intoned. “That’s how we’re going to get the benefit from these tools,” he insisted – adding that the same is true for all aspects of transport engineering. “That’s what we’re here at this conference for. That’s how we’re going to get the benefit for our companies.”

That said, Sir Moir asked the delegates to consider one more thought: cost versus value, or as it is more frequently framed, efficiency versus overheads. In his role as chief executive of FirstGroup, he said he regarded costs as absorption of revenue. “I never looked at cost as a proportion of the total. I used to say to our people, ‘All I want to know is if you’re using more of our revenues on a component this year than you did last. And if you are, are we making less money?’ In other words, I wanted them to focus on trying to use less of the revenue we generated. Design improvements flowed from that.”

By his own admission, Sir Moir’s conclusion was easy to remember: “Safety, safety, safety. It’s good for business, good for efficiency, good for effectiveness, and good for your brand,” he stated. “Injury prevention is my way of doing that. It’s about leadership and making everyone understand that you take it seriously. You may have other ways, but I believe preventing injury – for our staff and for our customers – is what puts you ahead of the game.” 

