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Tim Ward

Joined-up thinking

In the wake of this year’s Microlise Transport conference, Brian Tinham reviews issues and solutions for operators - as well as the future as perceived by some of the OEMs

It isn’t often that hauliers’ directors - much less fleet engineers and workshop managers - get the chance to consider much more than resolving immediate issues, and keeping customers and suppliers on side. Many remain in firefighting mode simply because margins are slim, competition fierce and resources, of necessity, limited.

So May’s Microlise Transport Conference, staged at the Ricoh Arena, Coventry, provided a welcome

opportunity to break out of that cycle and consider the bigger picture. And while the picture painted appeared rather less than lovely, acknowledging its imperfections is critically important if operators are to get their thinking right at every level.

In fact, it’s key to driving appropriate investments. That’s true of business projects, such as telematics-based driver behaviour and fuel efficiency programmes. But it’s also the case with fleet renewals, taking account of

advancing technology and changing regulations and requirements.

So what are the top challenges as perceived by the conference speakers? For Kevin Richardson, recently inaugurated CEO of CILT (Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport), they include the increasingly integrated nature of supply chains but - from the transport perspective - also urbanisation. He also worries about devolution leading to policy divergence across UK cities that, in



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Lesley O’Brien, Freightlink

turn, might make CLOCS (Construction Logistics and Cyclist Safety) look benign. At least in terms of being a single standard for vehicle equipment, driver training and contract regulation.

Beyond these, Richardson is concerned about “disruptive technologies” as well as skills shortages throughout logistics and transport. The latter, he believes, is down to the industry’s largely negative image and a total absence of this subject in school curricula. And he adds that in too many cases even driving skills are not fully transferrable between operators. “We need a joined-up approach to change all that,” he warned.

FEMALE RESOURCES

We also need faster progress with initiatives like She’s RHA, the female movement in the Road Haulage Association, spearheaded by charismatic Freightlink Europe partner Lesley O’Brien (above right). She explained that the group is aimed at encouraging that great untapped resource of women into transport.

Incidentally, according to Nick Hay, managing director of Fowler Welch, the industry also needs far more



relevant apprenticeships, particularly in light of the Apprenticeship Levy. The latter is set to cost this operator £200,000 per year – which, in turn, requires the business to grow by £6.3 million merely to stand still.

Tackling the issues from a London perspective, Tim Ward (freight and fleet engagement manager at TfL – Transport for London) justified recent policies by stating that the job is to “keep London working and growing,

and a great place to live and visit”. He conceded that freight plays a very important business and social role, worth an estimated £200 billion annually. But – with a population of 9 million now growing to 10.7 million by 2030, as well as a conurbation already in breach of European air quality standards – something has to give.

“Freight is both a cause and a victim of congestion. Vans make up the bulk of urban transport. But as vehicle speeds reduce, due to congestion, operators feel they have to increase capacity, which makes the problem worse... Also, most deliveries are in the mornings because that’s when businesses think they need them.”

Hence TfL’s traffic mitigation programmes – with the emphasis on air quality and the safety of vulnerable road users. Hence also London mayor Sadiq Khan’s consultation on extending plans for the London ULEZ (ultra low emission zone), which will mandate Euro 6.

By the way, night-time delivery regulations are not in TfL’s bailiwick: those are down to the London boroughs under noise abatement. So not a lot of joined-up thinking there. [TE](#)

Future trucks

“By 2020 there will be more truck platoons but driverless trucks are at least a decade away.” So says Iveco product director Martin Flach. No one disputes that assertion. Indeed, Ray Ashworth, managing director of DAF in the UK, adds that it’s not just about proving the technology, but amending legislation across Europe to allow autonomous vehicles. That will certainly take time.

Does it matter? Well maybe, given the aerodynamic-based fuel savings, and safety and congestion improvements expected from truck platooning in particular. But, as Volvo product marketing manager John Comer points out: “We could also get these by using longer, heavier vehicles, as already happens in Scandinavia... Maybe we should also consider green corridors for such trucks?”

However, we also need government support for the development, and also acquisition, of trucks powered by emissions-reducing sustainable alternative fuels, he suggests. Those might include hydro-treated vegetable oils, CNG/LNG biomethane, maybe even hydrogen.

Meanwhile, MAN UK managing director Simon Elliott urges the industry not to close its collective mind to future technologies. However, he advocates pooling R&D resources to accelerate results, given the OEMs’ tiny budgets, compared to their automotive cousins.

“The industry should now work together and go for the alternative fuels most likely to deliver,” insists Elliott. And DAF Trucks’ Ashworth agrees: “We’ve all developed hybrids, spending huge amounts of money on the way, yet to date only a mere 50 have been registered across the whole of the UK transport industry.”

Clearly an expensive and unrewarding game. Yet, how well such a move might go down with the EU antitrust overseers is a moot point. Picking potential winners is another. As Iveco’s Flach puts it: “There are almost certainly going to be several right technologies – for urban transport compared to trunking down motorways, for example.”

The future just could be bright. But it also remains uncertain.