

LU'S OPERATIONAL VISION – TECHNOLOGY ENABLES CHANGE

by John Hawkins

The November 2011 TfL Board meeting received a three-page update of current LU thinking under the above title. It is necessarily more general than the thirty-six page confidential discussion paper leaked by the RMT union but, being issued under the name of LU Managing Director Mike Brown, it is confirmation of current LU emerging official thinking. The RMT released an anonymous committee publication covered with disclaimers that it does not represent current LU views or policy.

LU must adapt and embrace change because of new technology, increasing customer expectations and current economic realities. The line upgrades bring new technology, increasing automation and continual transformation to railway operations. Customers are welcoming new and emerging technologies, especially to plan journeys, receive information and pay for travel. Benefits of these changes are to be realised for customers, staff and the organisation. LU seeks to create a workforce that is increasingly proactive and visible to customers. These changes have consequences for the way customers view LU, and also for the way staff perceive the organisation. Staffing structures will need to be reviewed with the introduction of new technology, to ensure high levels of customer service, a reliable train service and continued efficiency.

TRAINS

Currently three of eleven lines have automatic signalling systems (stet). But by 2018, when the Northern line and SSR all have their new signalling commissioned, some 70% of the network will be automatic. The SSR upgrade provides an opportunity in itself – enabling the operation of four lines as a single integrated railway, with the potential for more integrated operations, creating greater flexibility with both rolling stock and train staff deployment. This will bring performance benefits and operating efficiencies.

Given the technology now available it is very unlikely that, after the S stock, LU will ever again buy a fleet of passenger trains with conventional drivers' cabs. This means that the new generation of tube train being developed for the Bakerloo, Piccadilly and Central lines, to be introduced in the 2020s, could dramatically change the train staff operating model. For train staff who currently drive a train, LU make a commitment that they can continue to do so for the rest of their career. (A 40 year change period? – Ed.). In return, drivers will need to show greater levels of flexibility to support long term service reliability improvement.

Work is still at an early stage, but the next generation of employees supporting the train service could be more like the train captains on the DLR. There is no doubt the role will change considerably, but it is certain that any staff supporting the train service of the future will be mobile, flexible, and customer focused.

STATIONS

Fewer ticket offices does not mean reduced staffing at stations more generally; the principle of having staff on LU stations throughout the operating day will remain. New ticketing technology and the way customers receive travel information and plan their journeys reduces the demand for ticket offices. However, these changes do not mean that station staff are not needed, but the way in which they help customers will be different. Staff will continue to play a key role in helping customers to navigate quickly and safely around the system.

Oyster has changed the way customers pay for travel, radically reducing demand for ticket selling. TfL is now working on the next generation of ticketing technology, which will allow customers with a contactless bank card to pay for travel simply by waving their bank card over the gateline to get the correct fare. There will be no need to buy a card from TfL or to top it up, further reducing demand for ticket sales. For those customers without a contactless bank card, the Oyster card will continue. Ticket machines are also being enhanced to carry out a wider range of customer service functions that have typically been done at ticket offices, including selling new cards and making adjustments to journeys.

Demand for ticket selling via ticket offices is continuing to reduce and will see sharper reductions once contactless bank cards come into use. Nevertheless, the need for staff at stations will remain. Staff will need to be increasingly knowledgeable and proactive, visible to customers in the ticket hall area, not out of sight in a ticket office. There will still need to be ticket offices at key gateway and other high profile stations. Staff deployment will continue to be dependent on customer demand levels, acknowledging the varying characteristics of demand at different stations. These changes could create multi-skilled staff that are flexible, visible and more focused on helping customers.

SERVICE CONTROL

Work is underway to look at the possibility of co-locating LU's Network Operations Centre with the Surface Control Centre in the Palestra building. This new Command and Control centre would ensure that operational incidents are dealt with faster, leading to less service and customer impact. Individual line control centres will continue at separate locations with an important line focus. The exception to this is the new SSR Control Centre where four lines will operate from one new location.

MAINTENANCE

Technology is a key driver for much of the change planned within LU's maintenance organisation. The way trains are maintained has historically been time-based, but going forward this will be service hours or distance based. As LU switches to computer-controlled signalling, the ability to predict and prevent degradation and failures remotely will dramatically increase. Similarly with track, a wide-scale adoption of Automatic Track Monitoring Systems means that track condition can be identified more efficiently without many of the manual inspections currently required. All of these technological changes will mean different skills being required by staff, allowing them to work differently.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The operational vision outlined above could mean that there will be changes to LU staff numbers in the future. However, employees would be better trained, with higher skills and more ability to continue to develop "on the job". The majority of station changes could be introduced before embarking on a programme of train transformation as automation technologies are introduced.

Integral to LU's approach to successfully developing this operational vision is the need for continued and direct employee engagement. Key to this is local relationships with staff; building a direct relationship between local managers and their staff to increase trust while recognising the importance of consultation with Trade Unions. LU must continue to manage openly and honestly.

From a wider perspective, LU will continue the programme of direct communication with employees. A major employee engagement initiative will be rolling out to all employees from 8 November 2011. These events provide an opportunity to share with staff the changes in technology that are coming and what this means for them. The events will explain how continual change is now part of the fabric of the organisation, while also highlighting that people are fundamental to our operational vision. The message will be that very many people could have security of employment by embracing new technologies, new ways of working, and being more flexible in what they do.

SUMMARY

This operational vision shows how the LU operational model could evolve and embrace technology to meet the challenges of the next decade. The vision is about improving standards of customer service by linking proactive and knowledgeable staff with new technology. This vision aims to deliver a credible future, recognising the benefits of technology and the need to continue to provide direct, face-to-face service levels for customers.