

WINNER'S

CASE STUDY



Category **Young Project Manager of the Year 2012**

Winner **Christian Irwin, Network Rail**

Sponsor



Overview

The Salisbury to Exeter signalling re-control project was central to Network Rail's cost saving plans. But in order to achieve the necessary return, and reduce the operational bill, the task of re-controlling 90 miles of track and seven signal boxes had to be completed in 30 months.

This type of timescale had never been achieved before; in fact, for a project of this magnitude, the company would normally allow double the time. Add to this, development time for key applications, and it was easy to see why some people said it was impossible. Step forward young project manager Christian Irwin and his team, determined to prove the sceptics wrong.

Objectives

In 2009, Network Rail was challenged by the Office for Rail Regulation and the Department for Transport to make considerable operational savings by the end of April 2014. Network Rail responded by funding a series of projects across the country – part of its National Operating Strategy.

The 90-mile Salisbury to Exeter route, part of the West of England Mainline, was a key part of this strategy. The £21m project involved the closure of seven railway signal boxes along the line, and the transfer of signalling to a central location in Basingstoke. The target from inception to completion was 30 months; the overall aim: a safer more reliable signalling system.

Resources

Christian Irwin was an inexperienced project manager fresh from the company's graduate scheme. His team was equally youthful, with both the project manager and one of the scheme's engineers under 25 years old. But, says Christian, this was more of a help than a hindrance, claiming "what was lacked for in experience was more than compensated for in enthusiasm, pride and sheer determination to succeed."

He was also assisted by a robust support structure. During his time on the company's graduate scheme, Christian was able to work with a variety of project managers, all with different styles of leadership. This helped enormously on the project, which called for a hands-on leadership approach to bring people together. And despite not having a background in engineering, he was able to tap into the team's diverse knowledge and skills to deliver the best possible outcome.



Challenges

The challenges on the project were twofold. Firstly, the operational difficulties of closing and replacing signals on the line within the 30-month timeframe, something that had never been achieved before. This had to be completed with minimal disruption and conflict – including the multiple stakeholders with an interest in the project and the 30+ signallers who sadly lost their job as a result. Also, owing to the exceptional delivery times, new initiatives needed to be developed and novel railway applications incorporated.

Secondly, there was the issue of credibility. Christian admits he made errors throughout the project and some wrong decisions; however, he was quick to learn – and importantly, make amends. This willingness to go the extra mile won favour with even the most seasoned professionals, earning rave reviews from stakeholders such as the delivery director of Invensys Rail (delivery contractor), South West Trains and the Wessex Route general manager. "I do not remember once having a feeling of them and us," said one partner. It also helped win over contractors during difficult negotiations and, in turn, secured the best possible deal for the UK taxpayer – the majority fund holder on the project.

Co-ordination

At the heart of the project was good communication. Internally, there were various stakeholders to appease. These included the Route Asset Management Team – the owners of the new signalling equipment – Maintenance – who maintains the new equipment – Operations – responsible for controlling train movements – and the train operators.

Externally, there was a heavy political focus, meaning additional reporting and governance processes. To manage all of these interests, a Project Charter – including the statement 'got an issue – let's talk' – was introduced. As well as offering clear guidance on managing issues, the charter also stressed the importance of face-to-face communication. This tactic gave rise to an open, transparent culture where problems were tackled head on and quickly overcome.

Successes

The project was delivered ahead of the challenging 30 month schedule in only 29 months; it was completed for £21m – £9m cheaper than if delivered in conventional timescales – and has achieved operational/maintenance savings of more than £1m per annum. But most impressively, it was delivered by an inexperienced project manager with little or no track record to speak of. "Failure was never an option," says Christian. "Determination and drive was the reason for this success."





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