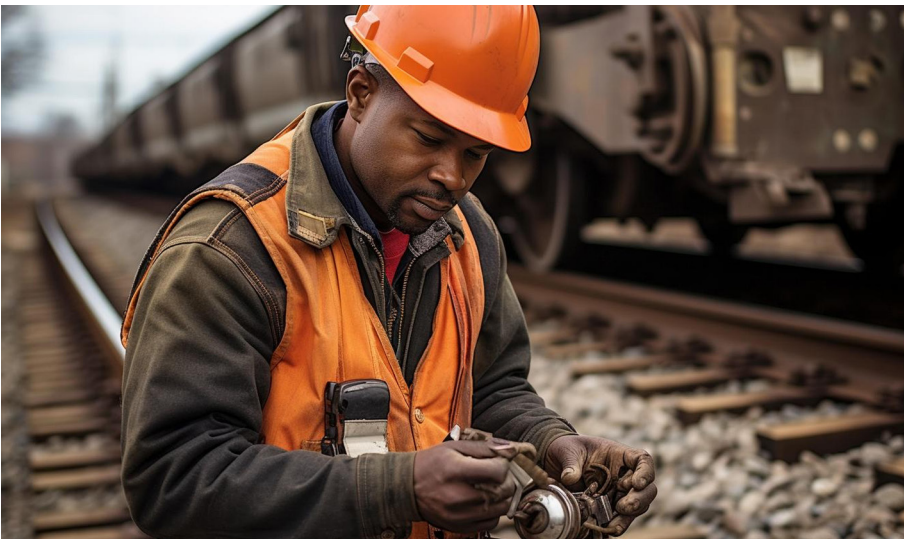


The OPC's Blueprint for High Performing Depot Teams

Jo Lawrence, joint CEO of the OPC, shares work to streamline recruitment for key depot roles, and offers reflections on career progression, driver retention, and developing a resilient, multi-skilled depot workforce



‘Operators benefit hugely from a versatile workforce and a strong leadership pipeline’

cognitive skills such as problem-solving, risk anticipation, and computer literacy. They must adhere strictly to rules and regulations. They rely on positive teamwork and need a degree of assertiveness to coordinate work. Decisiveness under pressure and thoroughness are key emotional characteristics for Signal Operators to perform effectively.

Shared NTS Across Roles

The profiling identified several common NTS across all three roles, some of which are:

- **Concentration** – essential for situational awareness and hazard detection.
- **Planning and decision making** – required for various levels of organisation and prioritisation across roles.
- **Rule adherence** – critical for safety and efficiency.
- **Communication skills** – clear verbal communication ensures smooth operations.
- **Emotional Resilience** – remaining calm under pressure and taking responsibility are essential.

Behavioural Indicators of Some Shared NTS

So, the same Non-Technical Skills (NTS) may be required across different roles. However, a detailed analysis of each job often reveals that varying aspects or levels of these NTS are needed depending on the role.

Concentration

High-level concentration is essential for Signal Operators, when monitoring train movements, signals, and points across multiple locations in the depot.

When a major rail client approached the Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC) for support, their goal was clear: enhance the recruitment process for Depot Drivers, Signal Operators, and Shunters, and create a bespoke assessment process, distinct from mainline Train Driver tools. The solution? A comprehensive Non-Technical Skills (NTS) profiling initiative led by expert Psychologists with a streamlined selection and assessment process.

The first step: NTS profiling

The NTS profiling process was critical in identifying the specific abilities, interpersonal skills, and competencies needed to perform each role safely and effectively. OPC business and occupational psychologists used specialist profiling techniques; observed employees in their roles, interviewed job experts, and analysed all the data. The outcome was an evidence-based framework that ensured recruitment tools were accurately aligned with job demands, enhancing the likelihood of hiring the best candidates into the right role.

Depot Drivers

Depot Drivers manage the movement of empty trains within depots. Key NTS include cognitive abilities like concentration and decision-making, practical skills such as physical coordination and numerical skills, and strong interpersonal skills like communication and teamwork. Emotional stability and conscientiousness are essential for staying calm under pressure.

Shunters

Depot Shunters are responsible for moving trains in and out of depots and coupling carriages. Key NTS include cognitive abilities like planning and organising and risk anticipation. Practical skills like physical strength and rule adherence are crucial, along with interpersonal skills like teamwork and verbal communications. Emotional resilience, including calmness and systematic checking are essential for their role.

Signal Operators

Signal Operators control train movements within depots through operating the signals and points in a depot. Their role requires



‘Depot operators often face challenges retaining driving teams, with many transitioning to mainline roles. Understanding employee motivations and career aspirations can help design effective recruitment and retention strategies’

They must remain situationally aware, while monitoring and reacting swiftly to unexpected changes. E.g., emergency train maintenance.

Shunters require a moderate level of concentration to remain alert while managing tasks like coupling carriages and correctly positioning trains in the depot. Their concentration is demonstrated when identifying and addressing issues, such as a misaligned coupling or an unnoticed fault, before they escalate.

Depot Drivers also require a high level of concentration. Their concentration is especially critical during repetitive tasks, such as moving empty trains or performing multiple backing manoeuvres to avoid collisions. They must remain vigilant to hazards, including personnel and other vehicles in the yard, ensuring safe navigation. Additionally, maintaining active awareness of signals and employing techniques to prevent autopilot operation are essential in their role.

Planning and decision making

Depot Drivers need to demonstrate a high level of planning and decision-making skills when organising train movements. They may gather and compile relevant information to coordinate driving activities and sequencing, often in collaboration with others. They must know when to make decisions independently, especially under time pressure, and when to escalate issues to a more senior level.

A Signal Operators’ role also demands advanced planning and organisational abilities to sequence train movements logically and set clear team priorities. They may prepare in advance by gathering necessary information and paperwork. They can multi-task efficiently, and make well-evaluated decisions that prioritise safety, as well as adapting plans if necessary and only referring to senior staff for complex decisions.

Shunters need moderate organisation and planning skills to prioritise tasks deciding which train to prioritise for service particularly under time pressure. Effective problem-solvers, they will evaluate situations take the initiative, and work collaboratively to agree on a course of action or prevent problems.

Communication

Signal Operators require high-level communication skills. They must listen attentively to instructions from supervisors, anticipate risks or dangerous situations while taking on the information. They must also deliver clear instructions to guide colleagues through processes, liaising between departments, or summarising incidents. They need the ability to communicate effectively via radio or telephone as well as an ability to use non-verbal communication like codes or signs in a noisy, busy depot environment.

Depot Drivers and Shunters share similar communication NTS requirements at a moderate proficiency level. They must listen carefully when receiving verbal reports from others with an ability to detect risks.

‘Having multi-skilled employees is highly beneficial and can address resourcing gaps. Staff can step into multiple roles as needed’

These roles need clear communication when making fault reports, summarising information, or asking for clarification. However, Depot Drivers must also communicate clearly via radio or telephone. They may also be responsible for simplifying technical information or complex matters, which is specific to this role.

Streamlining recruitment with a generic selection process

Given shared NTS required for these roles, the OPC suggested a generic selection process, where candidates underwent a standard set of assessments before being streamed into one or more appropriate roles. Jo Lawrence said: ‘When applicants take psychometric tests, some may perform well enough to qualify for all three roles to varying degrees. However, an understanding of the distinct NTS requirements for each role can help identify candidate who may be better suited to a specific role.’

She added: ‘Once streamed, candidates could then complete role-specific assessments and NTS based interviews. This approach can enhance recruitment efficiencies, offering flexibility and choice for both candidates and the organisation, as well as enhancing the candidates’ recruitment journey experience.’

The OPC offers a Bureau Service that can either oversee or fully manage a selection and assessment process, depending on client needs.



Expert OPC Assessment Tools for Recruitment

For over three decades, OPC Assessment has been at the forefront of developing evidence-based assessment tools tailored for the rail industry. These tools are specifically designed to identify the key NTS – cognitive abilities, interpersonal skills, and emotional characteristics needed for high-performing employees in safety-critical roles. By focusing on them operators can help ensure candidates are well-suited to the demands of these vital positions, building a safer, skilled and more effective workforce. Some examples of tools suitable for recruiting these depot roles:

- **Safe Concentration and Attention Test (SCAAT):** Assesses vigilance and attention on monotonous tasks.
- **Driver Fault Finding Test (DFFT):** Evaluates logical reasoning and problem-solving abilities.
- **Risk and Time Focus Questionnaire (RTQ):** Profiles personality traits and attitudes linked to safety-critical roles.
- **Railway Verbal Communication Exercise (rVce):** Tests verbal communication skills for front-line roles. This is complemented by the **Railway Written Communication Exercise (rWce)**, where candidates can also be assessed on their written communication skills.

Customised Assessment Tools

OPC Psychologists will always recommend and provide suitable assessment tools, prioritising off-the-shelf tools when available. However, if there are operator specific NTS needed for a depot role, the OPC can develop bespoke tools, when needed. These can include situational judgment tests that mirror real-world depot scenarios and NTS-based interviews for line managers. This tailored approach can help ensure a precise fit for recruitment needs.

Career Progression Opportunities and Support

The high degree of commonality in NTS across roles opens doors for exciting career progression. Employees could transition between roles as part of a structured career

path, gaining broader experience and expertise. For Example, Shunters or Depot Drivers could upskill to Signal Operators by building on shared skills like concentration and planning. Jo Lawrence emphasised: 'Having multi-skilled employees is highly beneficial and can address resourcing gaps. Staff can step into multiple roles as needed.'

The OPC suggests initiatives to help employees transition between roles by developing shared and role-specific skills. Their psychologists can assist with:

- **Cross-role Training** – job shadowing opportunities to help employees gain hands-on experience in other roles.
- **Structured Career Pathways** – establish clear progression routes with defined skills, timelines, and inspiring success stories to motivate employees.
- **NTS Frameworks** – outline the required NTS for each role with measurable objectives and personalised training plans to support career goals.
- **Mentoring** – pair employees seeking career progression with mentors for guidance, feedback, and skill development.
- **Leadership Development** – offer leadership training and continuous professional development covering decision-making, team management, and safety leadership, preparing employees for leadership roles through workshops and simulations.
- **Supportive Work Culture** – develop a workplace that values growth, collaboration, and skill development and celebrates successful transitions between roles.

Retention in Depot Driving Roles

Jo Lawrence highlighted: 'Depot operators often face challenges retaining driving teams, with many transitioning to mainline roles. Understanding employee motivations and career aspirations can help design effective recruitment and retention strategies, that include career development, helping to boost retention.' The OPC can research the differences between Depot Drivers who stay and those who leave for mainline driving, creating psychological

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profiles. These insights can help improve recruitment and retention strategies.

Jo Lawrence summarised: 'Streamlining depot recruitment processes and developing career progression are essential for building a higher performing, more engaged and effective workforce.'

She highlighted the important start-point of key NTS profiling linked to utilising specialist assessment tools to better select, develop, and retain talent. Career development initiatives can motivate employees and provide the flexibility to address resourcing gaps.

'Operators benefit hugely from a versatile workforce and a strong leadership pipeline' Jo added. 'With a strategic approach to recruitment and development, depot teams can remain engaged, advance in their careers, and contribute to longer-term operational success.'

If you think the OPC can support your depot team recruitment and development, get in touch with the friendly team. [RP](mailto:admin@theopc.co.uk)



the **occupational
psychology** centre

Tel: 01923 234 646

Email: admin@theopc.co.uk

Visit: www.theopc.co.uk