Depot Operations Decoded

Katie Breach, Business Psychologist at OPC Assessment, explains how research reveals common Non-Technical Skills (NTS) across depot roles, applied at differing proficiency levels, and how recognising these nuances can help support safe, efficient operations and stronger, more resilient teams

Depot operations may not be the most visible part of the railway, but they are fundamental to how the industry functions. This is where trains are maintained, prepared, and moved, forming a 'backbone' that underpins safety, reliability, and performance across the wider network. Depot teams coordinate multiple activities, often under time pressure, with interdependent roles requiring careful attention and clear communication. Yet despite their vital contribution, depots can sometimes be overlooked when it comes to deeper analysis of how work is carried out day to day.

For depot leadership, this can create a familiar challenge. On paper, roles may seem clearly defined. In practice, responsibilities can overlap, plans change, and people must consistently coordinate actions with others. Safety and performance depend not only on technical competence but on how individuals behave, communicate, and make decisions in a fast-moving, safety-critical environment.

Recent analysis by Katie Breach, Business Psychologist at OPC Assessment, focused on unpicking this reality.

'I reviewed a wide range of depot role profiles alongside historical NTS research, mapping the shared behaviours that drive safe, effective performance. It was complex

IMAGE CREDIT: ISTOCK

work, but we identified the key behaviours that keep teams coordinated and safe. We also spotted common threads across roles. It's been very rewarding to see how these insights can strengthen team working, maintain safety standards and build resilience.'

The reality of depot work: shared space, shared responsibility

Depot environments vary widely, from large multi-fleet facilities to smaller localised sites. Job titles and responsibilities may differ between operators, and sometimes, even between depots within the same organisation. Yet one thing is consistent: the daily work is highly interconnected. Train movements, maintenance, and train presentation rely on sequencing and clear communication. People often work in close proximity, under pressure, with little margin for error. A decision in one role can immediately affect others, and a missed check or unclear handover can easily create delays or the risk of incidents.

Katie's desktop analysis, based on in depth and direct observation of depot roles, revealed a key insight: many roles share behavioural foundations that underpin performance.

'Depot roles rarely operate in isolation. Good performance depends as much on how people interact as on individual skills or procedures. Strong coordination, shared attention to safety, and clear communication are critical to keeping depots running smoothly. Effective leaders understand it's not just the key tasks that people do, but the NTS that support them that really shapes safe and effective performance every day' she says.

Shared skills, different demands

While many depot roles rely on core Non-Technical Skills (NTS), the way these skills are applied, and the level of proficiency required, can vary significantly between roles, responsibilities and tasks. Core NTS critical to safe performance include:

- Maintaining attention and concentration, often during repetitive or routine activities.
- Understanding and following rules, especially when under pressure.
- Carrying out careful checks.
- Communicating clearly and accurately.
- Anticipating risk and identifying potential problems.

Same NTS, different proficiency standard

At the same time, the analysis shows that roles differ in how these skills may be applied and in the expertise level required for them.

For example, (see Table 1) in terms of concentration, the Depot Driver requires sustained focus and monitoring surroundings when moving trains from mainline tracks into the depot, or repetitive internal depot movements between locations requiring vigilance over long periods. The Shunter (ground based) needs short bursts of attention and attention switching quickly between tasks while coupling trains, positioning engines or manually operating points. The Panel/ Control Operator monitors multiple trains and points, coordinating with multiple roles to maintain depot flow and spotting issues in real time.

Regarding decision-making, the Depot Driver may need to make timely, safe, and independent operational decisions and escalate complex issues as needed. The Shunter (ground based) may make short-term decisions in collaboration with colleagues to prevent delays. The Panel/ Control Operator needs advanced, structured and anticipatory decision-making skills for sequencing train movements across team.

In terms of communication, the Depot Driver provides clear verbal (radio) updates and concise fault reports. The Shunter (ground based) uses clear and precise radio, or face-to-face communication. The Panel/ Control Operator issues instructions to multiple team members and may need to provide alternative instructions or summarise incidents quickly at short notice.

It can be tempting to assume that if two roles both require 'concentration' or 'decision-making', they require these skills in the same way. In practice, this is rarely the case. How these skills are applied, and the differing levels of proficiency required, can vary between roles and across operators, reflecting variations in the level of challenge, pace, or risk across different depot environments.

Katie adds: 'Recognising these nuances matters. It explains why someone who performs well in one role may not suit another, even if tasks seem similar. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to role design, recruitment, training, or performance management can sometimes reduce efficiency and increase the possibility of safety incidents. Understanding the subtle differences can be extremely valuable for depot leaders.'

Seeing the depot as a connected team

Depot performance relies on team interactions as much as individual competence. How employees work together, communicating clearly, checking, speaking up and challenging assumptions, or aligning actions, can have a direct impact on safety and efficiency. Recognising both the shared and role-specific NTS can help leaders anticipate pressure points, make better operational decisions, and target recruitment and training more effectively.

From insight to action: thinking in layers of capability

One practical implication of the work is to view depot capability in layers. Core Non-Technical Skills (NTS) such as concentration, communication, checking, rules adherence, and risk awareness form the foundation. On top of these sit role-specific requirements, with some roles requiring greater emphasis on areas such as planning and coordination, vigilance, or fault-finding. This perspective helps distinguish shared behavioural expectations vs. where differences may be appropriate without compromising standards.

These insights are already being applied in live depot environments. Reflecting on this from an operational leadership perspective, Andy Richards, Head of Engineering Training at GTR, notes: 'The research insights resonate with the approach we developed alongside the OPC and successfully used in recruiting our operations teams. It's now shaping how we think about engineering workshop grade recruitment too, reinforcing its value in practice within a live depot environment.'

Starting with shared competencies could allow a 'funnel' approach to recruitment. Candidates could first be pre-selected against the behaviours that are critical across all roles, before drilling down into role-specific competencies, e.g., more complex communication proficiency for panel operators or decision-making under pressure for depot drivers.

Katie explains: 'By recognising common skills across depot roles, organisations can streamline recruitment without losing precision. Core NTS provide a reliable starting point, role-specific differences help ensure candidates are matched to the right positions. This approach could save time, improve candidate fit, supporting performance.'

Core NTS Across Depot Roles

Core NTS	Depot Driver	Ground Shunter	Panel Operator
Ability to concentrate	High need	Medium need	High need
Plan, organise & make effective decisions	Low	Medium	High
Anticipate risks & identify faults	High	Medium	High
Read, write & interpret information	Low	Low	High
Retain, learn new information	Medium	Medium	Medium

Table 1 ▶

Assessing Core NTS: the right tools for the job

NTS	Suggested OPC Tools	Notes on some aspects of the tests
Concentration	SCAAT (Safe Concentration and Attention Test) Train Dispatch Multi-Tasking Test (TDMT)	Assesses sustained attention, multi-tasking and attention switching. Concentrating on more than one task at once.
Planning & Organising Decision-Making	PPT (Professional Planning Test) CoreA (Core Skills Abstract Reasoning Test)	Planning, and prioritisation skills. Evaluates abstract reasoning ability to find solutions.
Anticipating Risks & Fault-Finding	RTQ (Risk & Time Focus Questionnaire)	Measures proactive risk awareness and fault detection ability.
Read, Write & Interpret Information	rWce (Railway Written Communication Exercise) SAFECE (Safe Communication Exercise)	Assesses comprehension, clarity, and accuracy in written communication.

Table 2

Assessing core NTS: the right tools for the job

OPC Assessment offers a suite of tools designed to evaluate these key NTS and their differing levels of proficiency as both recruitment and development tools (see Table 2 above).

Some tools may be more appropriate for one role vs. another, even when assessing the same competency, meeting different capability requirements. For instance, a shunter may need basic written communication making the rWce appropriate. A panel operator, however, has more complex communication demands, therefore, the SAFECE is more suitable. Both tests measure the same underlying skill, but at different competency levels.

Katie adds: 'Selecting the right assessment tools isn't just ticking boxes. It's about matching the tool to the role and the level of proficiency required. This ensures candidates are assessed fairly and accurately, while helping operational leaders identify people at the required capability level.'

Workforce development and progression

Understanding shared core NTS can also support training and development. Learning programmes such as the OPC's Non-Technical Skills (NTS) Training can target foundational skills for multiple roles, while role-specific modules can address the unique demands of some positions with an enhanced tailored programme. Once strong core foundational skills have been developed, employees can develop additional role-specific capabilities over time, allowing structured progression between roles and building a more flexible, resilient depot workforce.

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Depot roles, whether transitional or long-term, require consistent behavioural reliability and professional judgement. Recognising and investing in the expertise within depot teams and using evidence-based insights into shared and role-specific behaviours, can strengthen operational performance while maintaining the integrity of each, individual role.

Summary

Depot work can sometimes be framed around roles, rules, and procedures. This research indicates that beneath this structure lies a shared set of core behaviours; concentration, discipline, communication, checking, and risk awareness, that sustain operations day after day in complex, interdependent environments. These NTS form a common foundation across depot roles, even though how they may be applied and the level of challenge involved can differ from one role to another.

Seeing depot capability through this behavioural lens can offer a fresh perspective on recruitment and development. It shifts attention beyond job titles, highlighting how people perform, interact, and make decisions in real, everyday operational contexts. For depot leaders, this perspective can support the building of resilient, well-coordinated teams, helping them make more informed selection and development decisions with confidence.

'Understanding the shared behaviours and where demands differ gives us a clearer picture of how our teams must function together under pressure.'

Andy Richards

Andy Richards, Head of Engineering Training, GTR reflects: 'Managing engineering training across various depots and teams means ensuring people have the appropriate skills for the specific role, and that's not just about covering technical proficiency. Understanding the shared behaviours and where demands differ gives us a clearer picture of how our teams must function together under pressure. The OPC Assessment research provides an additional, practical framework to guide our recruitment and development, helping us build more capable, resilient teams across our depots and the wider network.'

If you think your depot recruitment and development could be sharper, OPC Assessment's depot-focused insights can help. Get in touch with our friendly team to help you match the right people to the right roles. RP

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