

Sheila's the queen of the roster

A NEW recruit to Connex, called Sheila, is revolutionising the way crews and trains are allocated work across the company's operation, writes Malcolm Parsons.

She assists service delivery and production staff by making all the information they need about diagrams and rosters easily available.

But Sheila's name isn't on any personnel records. She is a computer programme. Developed by the software company Rotherfield Peppard with Connex, Sheila allows operators and managers to react more rapidly and effectively if disruption occurs. The programme also reduces routine paper-based clerical tasks.

It is being used at Connex headquarters service delivery centre, and by service delivery managers, yard co-ordinators, roster clerks, performance managers and delay attribution clerks.

South West Trains and another operator have also signed up to the system.

Previously, diagrams and rosters – with variations for weekends and engineering work – were held in large folders with no easy way to find details of driver or train workings, let alone cross refer. Once the information was found it then had to be double checked against amendments.

Now it takes just a couple of clicks on a computer to find the information – which is updated twice a day – and take action to rearrange services.

If, for instance, a train is delayed, a manager can easily check the driver's next working and perhaps find that another driver is due to travel as a passenger and can step in to help.

Sheila allows users to access information in different ways according to need,

Computer software helps with most challenging clerical task



Martin Smithers at Connex HQ service delivery centre.

such as by crew or train service, and by time or location.

Andy Mead, operations project manager for Connex and the company's liaison with Rotherfield Peppard, said: "I would have loved to have had this when I was a traincrew supervisor."

Andy started on the railway 16 years ago as a junior railman at Slade Green station but since then he has worked in operational jobs such as guard, roster clerk, traincrew supervisor and service delivery manager. His knowledge – and

that of other ground staff – formed the company's input to the system.

It developed from another system, called Bruce, which Connex and Rotherfield Peppard are working on. Bruce is a portable system for drivers which shows their schedules and can be updated in real time. Eight drivers are currently testing Bruce while Sheila has become operational.

Martin Smithers, senior train service manager at Connex's service delivery centre, uses Sheila and says the system

has had a big impact. "We are not control nowadays, that's Network Rail's function with an overview of signalboxes and train movements. Our role is to co-ordinate traincrew, trains and keep an eye on train maintenance needs too."

Martin, who joined the railway at Wimbledon divisional office in 1974, says the system is particularly useful with suburban services.

"On the main line there can be more time to react, but some suburban services have six-minute turnrounds. As local managers have the system too they can monitor things and suggest reactions to us."

At Charing Cross, John Leitch, a service delivery manager for Metro North, is another fan of Sheila. "It's made things so much easier."

He and his colleagues are the drivers' first line managers and they book on with them and allocate work.

The schedule cards, whether for normal service or if there is some form of alteration, such as engineering works, are produced by Sheila. "The sheets are clearer and contain more information," says John, who started his career in Glasgow, where his dad was a driver.

■ Knowing the railway's love of abbreviations, Railnews asked what SHEILA stands for.

It's an unexpected answer from Andy, and the clue is in the system for drivers from which it evolved. "That is called Bruce, because the guy who did a lot of work on it had been in Australia. Sheila just followed on..."