Country:	Europe-wide
Member/Company	*UNIFE*
Initiative	*STAFFER – the European Rail Skills Alliance*

Overview

Rail is a hallmark of modern European life – citizens ride trains, trams and metros every day to go to work and see loved ones, our goods reach faraway markets on its freight lines and allow visitors to experience the wonders of the European Union. It will become even more depended upon as the European Commission has made addressing climate change a cornerstone of European policy and has identified rail as a potential backbone for sustainable mobility – under the 2020 Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, which calls to double high-speed rail and freight traffic by 2030 and 2050, respectively. However, there's one big problem – Europe is currently lacking the skills needed to keep its railways humming to their full potential.

The STAFFER Blueprint for Skills is an EU-funded framework for strategic cooperation between key businesses, trade unions, academic and vocational training stakeholders and public authorities. The aim is to support an overall sectoral skills strategy and develop concrete actions to address short- and medium-term skills needs. After several months of preparation, 32 partners submitted their proposal for a European project in February 2020. The Commission announced later the same year that the project – **S**kill **T**raining **A**lliance **F**or the **F**uture **E**uropean **R**ail system (STAFFER) – had been approved as the future Blueprint for our sector.

The idea for STAFFER was first conceived in 2019 when a European Commission Study on the competitiveness of the Rail Supply Industry identified the "promotion of the development of skills and safeguard of access to skilled labour" as one of the main action fields for ensuring Europe's rail supply industry's leadership. According to this study, "the supply of technical engineers may become a bottleneck in maintaining the competitive position of the EU rail supply industry". The report even stated that "combined with a decreasing workforce due to ageing, perception of an unattractive sector, and changing skill requirements due to the digital transformation, it is expected that this skills shortage could increase in the near future". These mounting challenges necessitated action without further delay. Later that year, the Final Report of the EC Expert Group on the Competitiveness of the EU Rail Supply Industry confirmed that "in view of the ageing population, a significant cohort of employees is expected to retire within the coming years. At the same time, transformation related to digital and high-tech technologies creates mismatches between available and demanded skills. Already now, enterprises in many Member States are reporting difficulties to find railway engineers".

By the end of 2019, following these discussions held within the EC Expert Group on the Competitiveness of the EU Rail Supply Industry, it was clear that these weaknesses must be addressed immediately. In response, the Commission shortlisted the rail industry as 1 of 6 sectors eligible for the creation of an Erasmus+ Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills.

Coordinated by the University of Genoa, our alliance officially started on 1 November 2020 and will last for 4 years. Its objective is to help identify the main existing skill gaps and assess the future needs in our industry, Vocational & Education Training (VET) institutions and technical universities to propose adaptations to curricula, training and educational programmes so as to address new technological developments and trends.

The consortium aims to complete these goals by first identifying operator and supplier needs, devising training programmes that foster the skills needed down the tracks and drafting recommendations for future developments in rail instruction. This work is being conducted by 9 work packages that work in conjunction and sequence with one another to ensure that their successes continue to generate growth in rail skills beyond our project's lifespan.

Key Messages

Europe is currently experiencing a period that will define the coming century. As Europeans exit the COVID-19 pandemic, witness renewed physical and economic insecurity and struggle with the mounting effects of climate change, it is essential that all of its systems are positioned to confront these challenges. Rail of staple of modern European life will be a key element of a successful economic recovery, greater continental cohesion and enabler of transportation decarbonisation. However, currently, it is unable to meet these needs.

Europe's rail – ranging from suppliers and operators to infrastructure managers and railway undertakings – are experiencing a skill shortage caused by its workforce approaching a well-deserved retirement, exacerbated by accelerating emerging technologies that necessitates new competencies. The sector, and our peers in academia and vocational instruction, believe that Europe's schools, universities and training centres are valuable assets in our efforts to empower students, job seekers, current rail professionals and those seeking a career transition with the skills needed to design, manufacture, deploy and operate a green, digital railway network that connects the European Union. This entails greater STEM expertise, language skills that permit cross-border cooperation, ensuring a favorable landscape for green and digital mobility and more. STAFFER partners have maintained a long-term approach through the creation of assessment methodologies and extensive classification of programmes across Europe prepares rail educators and policy makers to continue adjust curricula beyond the lifespan of this project.

Moreover, the involvement of Member States-OECD-countries and other public and private entities at national level are equally fundamental to achieve the proposed objectives – to promote rail transport and make sure that we have the workforce needed to respond to the challenges of the future. Joint awareness-raising actions with the various stakeholders, as well as the effective investment on the sector through the allocation of financial resources that promote public policies are measures that we would like to continue to see being developed.