

DfBB Women in Transport Podcast:

Lorna McAtear

Annie: Welcome to the Driving for Better Business podcast celebrating women working in transport, fleet management, and road safety. Delighted that with me today is Lorna McAtear, who is the Fleet Manager for National Grid. Lorna, a really warm welcome to the Driving for Better Business podcast. Now, whenever we hear the title 'Fleet Manager', it conjures up phrases like planning, managing, coordinating drivers, vehicles, procurement, utilisation, and then there's maintenance and repair. A whole host of things. But, what does a normal week look like for you? Is there a 'normal week'?

Lorna: Great question – no, I don't think there is a normal week. So, even if I just take today as an example, I've gone from company car orders, through to consultation papers, through to reporting for various things out there that we've signed up to, your EV100s and everything else... I've gone into what's next on our Responsible Business Charter, through to strategic direction and planning for the next couple of years, and I'm reading through CVs, because I've got a current vacancy at the moment. So, there is no normal week, and it really does depend on when the phone rings, and what the query is on the other side of it.

Annie: Excellent. Well, your knowledge around fleet management is phenomenal. And in particular, telematics. Where does the learning on telematics in particular come from? Was it on the job? Or was it somewhere special that you went to get that kind of knowledge?

Lorna: So, I didn't fall into fleet in your traditional way that a lot of people do. In fact, I'm not sure if there is a traditional way of falling into fleet, you kind of end up there, one way or another. I used to be an IT Project Manager, so actually all of my background and early career was data systems, coding... I didn't quite program but I kind of got there. So a lot of my knowledge was already in that digital space. So I picked up telemetry projects. What I had to do was look at some carbon reduction stuff. I was kind of filling a gap in terms of projects I'd got, and they said 'oh, we've given some money over here to fleet, go and see what they're up to and how they're spending it for us'. And it was telemetry and carbon reduction. So, I literally got involved that way around. And, because of my understanding of how computers work – for want of a better description – it made it so much easier. I was one of the first at that point in time that went with a one-box solution, instead of the two-box solutions that were out there at that point in time. And I remember going away to a session with my colleague that I kind of revered – they were up there on this pedestal – and we got to the end of this meeting and on data and language in vehicles and black boxes. And at the end of it, he asked me if I understood everything that was going on – and I went 'yeah, everything, why?'. He went 'I didn't have a clue what they were talking about'. You suddenly realise that what you've got is a different skillset – and it's just as valid. Even now, I get asked how I got into fleet, and how do you get there

from IT. And it's like... over half of a car is computing now. It's actually a logical step when you think about it.

Annie: Well absolutely. And that's a really interesting point – so, at the moment, there's some really focused discussions about electric vehicles, the pros and cons... and they're also things that businesses need to consider when changing their fleet, and looking at electric vehicles and other systems that are on cars and vans nowadays. So what are your thoughts on how this change can be managed, with all this technology that's around?

Lorna: It's an interesting one, because with that, I guess I've got that project management skillset that's inherently there now – so you look at all of it very differently. You look at where the legislation is coming down. You look at what's going to happen to you next. I guess I'm always in the 'what's next?' space. So, with that, I'm always questions 'what have I got today?', 'what do I need tomorrow?', and 'how do I get there?'. It's putting that planning into it, and understanding what the barriers are that people are going to have to overcome, and how you move through each of those. Is it a transition, and you've got a handful of people that you need to deal with? Is it something you've got to do immediately, because actually your company is one of those that wants to promote this as a product themselves? So, you need to understand what each company does, what's driving it forward. And therefore you can get in on that messaging. And once you understand that yourself, and how your fleets are used, it makes it easier for you to talk to all the other people in the company, to make sure you're all heading in the same direction. And that's the key thing – it's getting in the right direction.

Annie: Yeah, and you've mentioned about talking to others in the company, so... National Grid – correct me if I'm wrong – I think it's one of the world's largest publicly listed utility companies? And operates around 20,000 vehicles, I think I read, in a mixed fleet.

Lorna: Yes, there's about 10,000 vehicles over in the US, and again the same over here now that we've bought the Western Power – and that's part of it now. So we've got the distribution, as well as the transmission business. So yeah, quite a large mixed fleet.

Annie: And ensuring safety and compliance standards are being met in something that large – firstly, it's a huge priority, and must be quite difficult to manage. So, how crucial is the internal collaboration to achieve that?

Lorna: Oh it's absolutely crucial. Some things are easier – so we've got some unionised areas as well of that business. So some things are easier in terms of, when you think of O Licences and what you need to do for those heavier vehicles, it's actually quite clear-cut. It's black and white – you either follow the rule, or you don't. So, that makes those discussions really easy.

It's when you're in those calmer, more emotive side of things that make things just that little bit more of a challenge. And everyone has a different opinion as well – we all drive, so everybody has an opinion of how you should manage a car fleet. And it's working out, then, how you interact with all those business units, how you interact with the safety teams. Because, as a utility, safety is absolutely critical to us for all sorts of other reasons – we're dealing with high-voltage stuff all the time. So making sure of that... it's almost inherent in our DNA, that we look at what we do, when we do it, when it comes to our vehicles as well. So it's having that transcend all the way through your business. Safety and compliance are absolutely key for us. It was a real problem during Covid as well, when we were trying to put new vehicles out there – so getting the electric cars out – when you've got a different technology and you couldn't do your usual on-the-drive training.

Annie: Yeah. We touched on safety earlier, and vehicles come with a range of safety systems. So, how beneficial are these systems in reducing the risk for the National Grid for their people that drive?

Lorna: You have to think of safety systems as a tool and a guide. That's one of the things I'm very keen to get through to people. They're a guide for you as the driver, they're a prompt. And safety systems therefore are absolutely critical – they're needed out there. When you've got a challenge with drivers is that some vehicles now have got them and they're slightly more aggressive out there. How do you educate your drivers that 'that lane departure does this for this reason, but you can override it if you've got to move out beyond that...'? There are all sorts of things that you need to understand what you can do and how you can do it. I think there are some challenges with some of those systems, if I'm being brutally honest. And as much as I'm an advocate for them, there are some bits that I think 'that might just be a little bit too aggressive...'. So, when your sensors get dirty on the vehicles, for example, other shadows play in, and then your vehicle will anchor up. And if you're not prepared for it, and you're slow manoeuvring – reversing into your driveway for example... that anchoring up might actually jar your wrist on the steering wheel. So it's having a look at things in a very different way, and just making sure your drivers are comfortable with their vehicles – because ultimately, they're the ones in control of it, they're the ones that take that risk. It's their responsibility.

Annie: Yeah, and do you know what – I actually hadn't thought of that angle, about keeping the sensors clean and tidy. You'd think that would be a natural thing, but you're quite right – I mean, my parking sensors probably haven't been cleaned in a million years. Luckily, I don't need them to park – although some would disagree if they could see my parking! But, with the safety systems, you've mentioned something really important there about educating the drivers. And I don't think there's enough education and information out there for drivers to understand the safety systems they have available to them, and actually how they need to work with them. Because these systems, they don't do it for you, they're there to assist the driver. Where do people get that information?

Lorna: So, we try where we can to impart that. One of the things we also do in our handbooks and everything else is we ensure drivers read the handbooks that come with their vehicles. So, normally you'd have your handover to start with, you'd go through most of that, you'd familiarise with all the

patrols and the basics that you do out there. And then you get into the more detailed stuff. The problem is, we don't always know what comes on these vehicles now. And especially with the electric ones, and the over-the-system updates, some things are coming down that switch something else on, or turn something else off. So, it's trying to keep up to date with it, and the guidance we give to a lot of our drivers is just to keep reading those updates. Keep reading that, because every vehicle is different. And my fleet is made up of so many different vehicles, I can't actually as an individual tell all of my drivers 'right, on your vehicle you have this, and on your vehicle, you have this'. Which is why I come back to that point that ultimately, it's still the driver's responsibility, and that's the bit that we communicate to them. It is your responsibility to familiarise yourself with your vehicle and make sure you understand how it works. Of course, we're seeing it now with the weather – it's raining so much, and my car the other day turned around and said, 'I can't actually give you any assistance because I can't see'. And handed over to me. And when you're stuck on a motorway, stuck between junctions on a motorway, you can't pull over and wait for the rain to stop. You've just got to slow down and do it yourself again.

Annie: Yeah – and that's a really good reminder, that actually these things are there to assist us, not to do it for us. Are there systems that are trying to find that balance, between what we need now, and what we may need in the future? Are there particular systems that you think are essential now, that will see us through to the future, or do you think people should be looking to the future for things like lane-keep assist? Because that's reliant on so many other things, to be in the right place to actually help the technology work.

Lorna: Yeah, and it's also reliant on whether there are white lines on the road that are clearly marked. So, when you look at the roadworks that we've got, the temporary movements that we've got, the potholes that we've got... actually the highway itself isn't helping us when you move into these vehicles and the more advanced technology on it. And the one thing – it's horrible to say it, isn't it – but I'm actually petrified about the autonomous vehicles, and the automated driving. And the reason I say that is that I think of them as being a bit like aeroplanes. You have an aeroplane, but the pilot still has to be trained, even though in itself it does the autopilot and does it for you. And when we've got these vehicles... even now when you have a vehicle beep at you, you're distracted trying to work out why it's beeped at you. And you're trying to work out what it is. And the more the vehicle drives for you, the less you drive it yourself. So, I love it when you get these companies out there saying 'yeah, but what about the blame game?' and 'the human can take over when the computer doesn't know what it's doing'... yeah, but not if the human's reading a book, because the car's been driving for them. Or not if the human's actually forgotten how to respond in a skid, or anything else that's going on. We still need to make sure our drivers know how to drive.

Annie: Absolutely. And there is thinking that says if we're not expecting drivers to actually be involved in the driving, when it comes to them needing to be, they won't be ready to actually pick up the reins and drive again. So it's really quite difficult in that space that we've got between manual driving to fully automated... there's that gap in the middle where we're expected to have that half-and-half world. That, to me, is where the risk is at the moment.

Lorna: That's how I see it as well. You've got that mixed messaging, saying 'yeah, it's great, because actually if you've got mobility issues and you need to get in this vehicle, this vehicle can turn up and it can take you there, and it can do this...' and it's like, yeah, great. But then you can't be that driver that takes over when something goes wrong.

Annie: Yeah. And one of the things that we've seen at the moment as well is that, when people are driving as part of their job, they don't see that as a skill, or the vehicle as the tool that they're using. They don't see themselves as professional drivers, it's just what they do to get to their jobs. So if the vehicle isn't seen as the workplace at the moment, then when we come onto assisted vehicles and fully autonomous, it's going to be seen as less of something that you do that's a tool and a skill, and more of the workplace in which you don't have to drive but you can do other work. How can we get around that?

Lorna: I don't honestly know. I have no answers to that one. And I think that transition as well... I sat in a review for another vehicle, and they were talking about creating these vehicles that were a mobile workspace, the electric ones. And we pointed out to them 'well, that's great, but what you've now got is this bright light beacon on a charging point that's a captive audience for anybody who wants to come and smash the windscreen for you'. Because you're advertising that you're sitting in there, on your laptop, working away, quite happily – which are all good things, but actually there is another lens now. You've now got an advertising beacon saying 'hey! I'm over here with an expensive piece of kit'. How do you manage that safety?

Annie: Yeah, all these additional risks that we hadn't considered in the past. That's amazing. Ok, so, these are really hot topics. Another thing I know that you're involved in is fleet news webinars that happen monthly. And these also consider things that are hot topics. What's been going on there?

Lorna: So yeah, as you said, I'm on a lot of webinars. One of them that I do is Fleet News at 10. So Fleet News run it, it's the last Friday of every month at 10 o'clock. There's a whole panel of us on there, fleet managers, Paul from AFP as well is the chair. And literally we pick up any hot topic. Whether that's the latest legislation coming through – so one thing most people don't realise is that the Block Exemption rules have gone through and been ratified. So, how does that affect fleet managers? What does that mean? So it can be anything from that kind of detail of legislation, all the way through to advice on how to charge the vehicles because you've got some problems coming through at the moment, or supply chain issues that we're seeing, the challenges in the insurance market at the moment and how they're adapting – or not, as the case may be – to this transition to electric vehicles and zero emission vehicles going forward. That session's really good, and I think some Fridays, it actually turns into more of a therapy-type session, because we're all kind of in the same mode going 'thank goodness it's not just me that's having these problems'!

Annie: And you know, it is good to talk. It is good to discuss. And that's why we're really keen within the Driving for Better Business programme to share that learning and that good practice, because then we can all be part of the solution, which would be brilliant.

Lorna: And we can't know it all at the moment – it's such a challenge, it's moving so fast. We do have to reach out to people and put an arm around each other and say, 'it's alright, I'm here, I'm having the same problem – let's see how we can figure it out, let's have a coffee'. Let's do more of that.

Annie: Lorna, it's been a hugely enjoyable and insightful interview today. To finish – what top three qualities do you think make a good fleet manager?

Lorna: Oh wow, now there's a challenging question. I think for me, the first one – especially in this industry at the moment – is patience and flexibility. A combination of the two. Flexibility because you need to be open to new ideas, new skillsets coming in, different offerings from people, innovation. Patience because not everyone can move at the same time, not everybody wants to move at the same time. So you need both of those to be able to make a change. Three qualities... to have a vision. So one thing I'm always talking about when I'm out there is the end goal. Know where you're going, and then all the bits that are needed to do that. So basically the plan. Have your plan, have your vision, because then you'll bring your teams along with you, and you'll bring everybody else along with you. They'll understand how you're going to get to that goal, even if it doesn't seem today like it's achievable. You can plan your way towards it. And then finally I think, for me, it's communication. Always has been and always will be. It's not just being able to talk – as we are right now – it's about listening, and listening to everyone. As I said, we're moving so fast in this industry at the moment, everyone has a valid opinion on what's going on out there. And we need to be able to listen to other people. Because as much as we've just talked about automated driving and autonomous vehicles – which scares the life out of me – actually, if I listen more and more to how it can work, maybe I'll change my opinion and can see a way forward, and how we can adapt through it.

Annie: Brilliant. Thanks Lorna, it's been a huge pleasure talking to you today. If you'd like to hear more Women in Transport podcast sessions, go to the Driving for Better Business website – www.drivingforbetterbusiness.com. Lorna, let's talk some more, because I've thoroughly enjoyed talking to you today. Thank you.

Lorna: Thank you.

For those of you who want to know more about Driving for Better Business and the benefits to managing and reducing your road risk, visit the website at

<https://www.drivingforbetterbusiness.com>