

DfBB Podcast – August 2023

Geraint Davies, Concession Director, FORS

Simon: Hello and welcome to this edition of Let's Talk Fleet Risk, a podcast for those who manage drivers and their vehicles and want to reduce road risk in their organisation.

Welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk. My guest for this episode of the podcast is Geraint Davis, who is the new concession director for FORS, the UK's leading fleet accreditation scheme. Established 15 years ago, it now boasts almost 5000 accredited operators who, together, operate over 90,000 vehicles.

Welcome to the podcast Geraint. So perhaps you could start by just telling us a little bit about what your role involves and what you're looking to achieve with FORS?

Geraint: It's great to have the opportunity to join you today. Driving for Better Business is an initiative we at FORS fully support, and in my role as Concession Director I'm really looking forward to strengthening our ties with you. So, what does my role involve? Well, I will be leading the FORS team through the day to day of running the scheme, helping to develop a standard, and liaising with key stakeholders via the trade associations Logistics UK, RHA, and others; local authorities, politicians or the enforcement bodies. The DVSA, the Office of the Traffic Commissioner and such like along the way. I'm personally very passionate about FORS and the difference it brings for specifiers, our operators and as well the wider community.

So really, I'm looking forward to developing FORS as a leading quality assurance scheme, improving the value for our accredited operators and specifiers and also growing into new sectors where we can. In my previous roles at the coalface of the road freight sector. I have taken a business through FORS accreditation, I've worked through audits – I've been a FORS auditor and personally delivered FORS training. I know the benefits FORS can bring to an organisation when it comes to improving safety and efficiency, and essentially – and crucially – winning more business.

Simon: That's a really broad role, and you alluded to some of the experience you've got over the last few years which we'll come onto as we go through the podcast, because some of those I think are really interesting and relevant.

So, you've only been with FORS for a few weeks. You mentioned about your previous role as a FORS accredited operator – so you were Chief Operating Officer for John Raymond Transport, and while you were there you led the risk management strategy for over 22 years, wasn't it? So, I just wanted to sort of ask you what were the biggest challenges you faced when you when you started managing driver and fleet risk?

Geraint: Where do you start? John Raymond Transport has over 100 trucks and 200 trailers and multiple depots - over 150 employees. As COO my key responsibility is to make it work every day while delivering value for our customers and profitability.

While doing all this we also had to make sure we were operating to the highest standards of roadworthiness and compliance across all aspects of transport, business, and of course employment legislation – that's nothing new. These are challenges that every fleet operator faces every day, and you need systems and processes in place to give you and your team the confidence that it is a well-run business. That's easier said than done of course, and to be successful requires teamwork, and everybody pulling in the same direction with a set of common goals; one vision, if you will.

Communication is key, it's the most important thing in my leadership toolbox. I've always been good at talking – that's what everybody says! And it's developing the right framework and support, and also training. At John Raymond Transport, I delivered the driver CPC training myself. There won't be many COO's that do that, but it kept me close to the business, and gave me direct communication channels to the drivers – that pays dividends when you try to develop a winning culture in an organisation and take everybody on the journey with you.

Simon: Yes, it certainly does. 22 years you were there – that's a very long time to be managing risk for one operator, so I was wondering what changes you saw over that time – in how you manage risk, and how the challenges evolved.

Geraint: Well, one of the most exciting things about the fleet sector is the constant state of change – be it technical improvements, legislation, or external impacts. During my time at John Raymond Transport, I worked through the stock market crash, the banking crisis, the credit crunch, and of course the pandemic – and now the cost of living crisis, and everything that that brings. All of these things brought about a massive change to the sector.

On a technical front, vehicle development has been dramatic. When I first started out, we had paper tachograph discs. I remember driving a Seddon Atkinson 401, and now we've got the Volvo I-Shift shift, and automated manual gearboxes, all sorts of things. Improving safety for vulnerable road users – that's been huge. We've seen big improvements in greenhouse gas emissions from vehicles. And we witnessed digitisation in the sector – whether it be digital tachographs, telematics, tracking.

There's a tremendous number of things available to operators, which at best were patchy when I first joined industry.

Data is the new oil. It needs to be refined in order to be used and be useful. The underlying lesson is you need to be flexible and adaptable to survive. As an operator in the sector, you need the tools and support to help you navigate your way through these changes. This is one of the key reasons why I recommended the FORS accreditation at John Raymond Transport 15 years ago. FORS has been right beside me, and we've evolved as a business, and as the industry has changed so has FORS. When I look forward to at the changes still to come, the biggest impact will come from decarbonisation of commercial vehicles. It's on the horizon now. This is going to transform how fleets operate and I'm excited about how the next developments in batteries, electric or hydrogen vehicles, or alternative fuels, and how we're going to adapt and bring them into fleets.

Simon: So, you mentioned that you brought FORS into John Raymond Transport 15 years ago. Now, we're looking currently at leadership and business benefits as part of our campaign messaging. And presumably the FORS framework helped improve the way you were managing, and that's what led to some of the business benefits you saw. We recently published a case study that you helped us put together for John Raymond Transport which showed up reduction in incidents of over 23% year on year. But not only that – it showed a reduction in driver penalties by about 1/3, as well as improvements in fuel use and CO2 emissions. That's clearly very important to you as it demonstrates the value of the work that you've done – but I was wondering how those kinds of results were valued by the rest of the board. Did you have the support from the rest of the management team to do what you needed to do, and did they value what came out of it?

Geraint: Absolutely – from the board and the wider group. For an organisation to be successful you've got to get everybody on board, from the boardroom to the drivers rest area, and of course the technicians and everybody involved in the business. Vehicle safety and compliance can't sit in a back corner outside the main performance indicators of the business, and I was always very appreciative that John' Raymond Transport recognised that.

Ensuring you have a well-run business is obviously crucial to the financial performance of the organisation, which is a key consideration for the board. Improvements you mentioned around reduction in incidents and driver penalties are also important indicators for the underlying health of the business. And of course, they make a direct correlation with the bottom line.

Simon: You recently left John Raymond Transport and you've now taken up the role of Concession Director, which is a role with Sopra Steria, who now run the FORS

programme. Sopra Steria only took over FORS at the beginning of last year, 2022, so perhaps tell us a little bit about what's happened with FORS since Sopra Steria took over, and how your role is going to fit into that. What are your objectives and aspirations for the FORS programme going forward?

Geraint: Well, it's a really great honour for me to take up this role. I know how important FORS can be for a business, as I've seen it from the other side, of course. Sopra Steria took over the administration of the scheme in January last year and it's been an exciting year of transition – keeping the service firing on all cylinders, while putting up the building blocks in place for future growth and development. We've trained over 4600 managers, seen over 130,000 e-learning courses taken, and we've funded over 1600 driver training courses, and delivered 265 practitioner courses - I think those are some great numbers and it's definitely something to build on.

And just a word on FORS practitioners – I'm one of them – they're a very important part of the FORS family. These people have a deep knowledge and understanding of the benefits of FORS, at a level equivalent to a master's graduate. We'll be looking to work even closer with our practitioners in future, and that's a key goal of mine.

Simon: Your past experience that we spoke about earlier - Chief Operating Officer and Transport Manager – you've also been Chair of Logistics UK's Road Freight Council. You've been a director of the RHA – that's obviously a great help. You've also been a FORS auditor and a Driver Trainer. This must be a fairly unique breadth of experience – so what kind of insight does all of that experience give you as you look to develop FORS and engage with fleet managers?

Geraint: What operators want... what operators need... I always think about that Mel Gibson film, *What Women Want*, where Mel Gibson has a terrible accident, gets electrocuted and can suddenly read the minds of women.

Well, I like to think we can get into the minds of operators, and we know what operators want now, and we're much more aligned with that. My previous role at an operational level with John Raymond Transport, as a member and chair of the Logistics UK Road Freight Council, UK Road Freight Council at Westminster, and more recently, Director of the Road Haulage Association will certainly be a benefit as we move towards the future.

Simon: It was a very good film, and I think that is a good analogy for the sort of benefits that you can bring to FORS, so that's really good. Now, there's obviously a number of audited accreditation schemes out there for fleet operators. FORS is probably the most well-known of those. Just being a bit agnostic about schemes for now, why should fleet operators consider registering with an accreditation scheme? What does it bring to the fleet operator?

Geraint: Well, for me, FORS has always been the benchmark for the fleet and transport sector, and this remains the case really. I certainly don't think there's an equivalent scheme offering anywhere near the breadth of the offering that FORS does at a holistic level. We've got nearly 5000 accredited operators as a testament to that. I think the vast majority of people in transport want to be known for running a good tight ship, and I think people want to work for those types of businesses.

On top of that, of course, customers want to work with transport suppliers they can trust. A trusted supply chain: that's what FORS accreditation offers. I think of it as the equivalent of a Michelin star. The scores on the doors on the restaurant. It tells other people something about you that sets you apart. You're a reputable business. You care about the people you employ and take the necessary precautions to look after other road users. It also says you're happy to have your systems and processes measured by a third-party auditor. It's a mark of quality.

Simon: And these schemes typically go much further than the legislation or HSE guidance goes, as far as compliance for fleet operators. And I know FORS certainly goes a lot further than that – why is it so important to go further than what's legally required?

Geraint: Right. I say that minimum standards get you a ticket to join the race. But if you really want to excel and demonstrate your capabilities to your clients, your competitors, and future employees then you need some means of differentiating yourself, which is where FORS delivers. It sets you apart from industry peers.

On another level, all of us involved in the industry have to strive to improve standards every day, and the FORS audit is one of the few measures where operators can demonstrate they're pushing the boundaries of safety, efficiency, and business performance.

Simon: Okay, so last question now. If a fleet passes their audit – and obviously many of your accredited fleets have done, you've got thousands who passed their audit – they've effectively been shown to meet the standard. But I'm wondering whether that's like a vehicle passing its MOT. Because, you know, the audit is a snapshot of the position on one day. So how does an accredited standard like FORS ensure compliance throughout the year, and what do you expect of your registered fleets to ensure that those high standards are continuously monitored and met?

Geraint: I think it's important that we see FORS as an accreditation... well, we see it as a process, or a business concept, rather than just a moment in time. It is a process. A culture. In passing the audit and gaining accreditation, a fleet operator has – in the first place – voluntarily put themselves forward for review. They said “yes, I think I meet the necessary standard in the way I run my fleet”. And then during the audit, they back that up with a demonstration that they have the systems, the processes, the data

reporting in place to operate at the highest level, particularly if you achieve FORS Gold.

As I said legislative compliance is a minimum standard, and of course operators have to demonstrate that when they present the vehicles for MOT, annual test, or they're stopped at the side of the road; a DVSA encounter, or it could be police CBU for a check. But have quality assurance processes in place within a FORS accredited operators' business, and should – and I've emphasised should – ensure that these issues are picked up in the normal course of fleet operation.

Simon: Excellent answer – I think you're absolutely right. It's all about improving and strengthening culture because that's how you embed the improvement.

So, Geraint, thank you very much for sharing your insights with us today. I appreciate you sharing the case study as well that we put together on John Raymond Transport, and I will put a link to that in the show notes, and I wish you well for your new role in FORS. Geraint, thanks again for your time today.

If you manage drivers and their vehicles and you face similar issues to those discussed in this podcast, there are links in the show notes to some useful resources on the Driving for Better Business website – and these are all free to access. If you enjoyed the conversation, please don't forget to hit subscribe so you know when the next episode is released. And please also give us a 5-star review - this helps us to get up the podcast rankings and makes it more visible to others who might also find it useful. You can follow us – that's Driving for Better Business on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. And most importantly please help us to spread the word – all our resources are free for those who manage fleets, and their employees who drive for work. Thank you for listening to Let's Talk Fleet Risk, and I look forward to welcoming you to the next episode.

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