Founding fathers

My entry into the transportation business was an unplanned one. I was taking a class in capital planning that was being audited by a Conrail Ph.D. in physics, who was studying electrification of the old Pennsylvania Railroad mainline from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh. (This study had been underway since 1920 and is still unfinished.)

Less than a year later, my transfer into Conrail’s intermodal group seemed to have been fated rather than orchestrated. The entire Intermodal Department had been eliminated and new employees were being sought by the husband of my university’s job-placement director.

These were difficult times for Conrail. Its long-term employees felt they were being ignored and being replaced by recent university graduates.

The veterans recognized railroads had been in decline since the end of World War II and that certain problems seemed inevitable. They frowned upon newly hired “planners,” a younger generation threatening to overturn time-honored practices in the industry. To the eager new employees, it was simply another case of “old and in the way” personnel blocking progress.

I was very fortunate to be able to work with both the young and old groups.

Many of my assigned projects gave me the opportunity to analyze longstanding problems. It seemed natural to try to learn what had worked and not worked in the past, and why.

I discovered that some past initiatives had failed due to reasons beyond the control of their creators, but often the basic ideas behind them could be developed and made to work in a different setting. Conrail, fighting for its very existence, became such a place. Plugged into the new environment created by railroad deregulation, some “old” ideas were reconfigured and successfully launched.

The veteran railroad employees at that time had a style much different from that of today’s industry leaders, but they grew up in different eras. They embraced a military culture and chain-of-command structure with morning conference calls complete with second-guessing and micromanagement. They commuted by train to downtown offices and drank at lunch — and after work.

But they were still proud professionals who were very good at their jobs.

My intermodal education was extensive. I learned all aspects of the business: train and terminal operations, equipment control, systems development and marketing and sales. Often, they would provide introductions to their industry friends for further instruction and my training was almost all on-the-job and conveyed orally — there were no textbooks.

A friend of mine once observed that the only written materials were the cocktail napkins drawn on at the bar — but nobody saved them.

Over the past 10 years, there has been a complete turnover in the industry. Downsizing and early retirement packages claimed an entire generation of industry managers. Newer managers were smart, but many lacked experience.

Historical documentation was often destroyed. When Conrail moved its headquarters, huge amounts of historical data were discarded. Some material had survived two bankruptcies and three acts of Congress but did not survive a move across the street.

The summer of 1993 was memorable for the heavy rains in the Midwest. By August, the railroads seemed to have service restored. I was most concerned about operations in southern California over the Labor Day weekend, and I was told not to worry. Los Angeles subsequently experienced a service meltdown that lasted six weeks.

Later, I was asked what had made me anticipate a problem unforeseen by the railroad. I recalled that the same problems had plagued northern New Jersey in 1978 and 1983. It wasn’t that I was smarter — I simply remembered the past. This particular railroad had no institutional memory going back that far. I had become an old-timer at age 35.

There is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for people wanting to remedy their intermodal historical deficiency. The Intermodal Transportation Institute (ITI) of the University of Denver is hosting the Intermodal Founding Fathers of North America Conference on July 27-29. More than 40 industry innovators will talk about their industry experiences. (Registration information is available at 303-744-7787.)

As chairman of this event I have had the privilege of communicating with many former industry leaders for the first time in many years. I am still astounded at their spirit and acuity.

In addition, the ITI is starting a five-year project to conduct archival-quality oral histories with more than 200 industry pioneers. These will start at the conference and continue. This is an attempt to preserve the industry’s intellectual heritage and capital. Many companies are contributing to this effort.

It is said that failure to learn from history dooms us to repeat the mistakes. Come to Colorado in July and learn from the masters. I hope to see you there.

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