

It's all about the nuts and bolts

President of New York-based freight railway NY&A **James Bonner** reflects on his career with **Dave Lustig**, emphasising the broad opportunities for career development available in the rail freight sector.

How long have you been working in the rail industry? Where have you worked previously?

The Kyle Railroad, based in Phillipsburg, Kansas, hired me as a track labourer for their Stratton, Colorado division in October 1997. RailAmerica acquired Kyle in early 2000, which later led to me taking up career opportunities throughout the USA. I've been working in some capacity since I was nine years old throwing newspapers, though railroading is the only career I've ever known.

What attracted you to a career in rail? Is it what you expected?

The people, first. My first boss was someone I knew and liked before I knew he worked for the railroad. When an entry level job was posted, he alerted me and I applied. If not for the fact that he was a likable and successful person, I don't think I would have been interested. Roles and responsibilities change, postings, locations and operating plans change, but the remarkable calibre of people in our industry does not. They remain committed to a collective goal, moving freight to move our country, and that goal fosters a collective purpose among railway people. This is the most enjoyable aspect of my career.

As a track maintenance technician, I enjoyed making a difference each day, and that remains my objective. A beautiful thing about our industry is that no matter what you're doing, you are helping. Whether it is checking tracks and replacing bolts, inspecting a locomotive and troubleshooting an issue, or participating in the transportation department ensuring

train movements, all those things add up to a fluid operation and you can go home at the end of each day knowing that something tangible happened because of your efforts.

What are your career highlights to date?

I am proud to have worked with, and for, some industry giants. The owners of Anacostia Rail Holdings, NY&A's parent company, were instrumental in the development of numerous shortline railroads, and the fact that I am on their team along with other leaders is absolutely an honour. I had the opportunity to work with dozens of leaders through my RailAmerica career as well, and many of them have gone on to do great things for our industry. I value and foster those relationships. In turn, I strive to encourage newcomers to our industry the way I have been encouraged by my mentors.

What are the main challenges you face in your role?

Operating in a dense urban environment is a challenge; be it tight operating windows for trains, navigating the political nature of interactions, or reaching potential customers that don't even know there is rail freight in New York City. The single biggest challenge is educating the public at large about the overall benefits



JAMES BONNER
President, New York & Atlantic Railway

The New York & Atlantic Railway is a shortline linking the New York borough of Queens with terminals on Long Island, carrying a range of commodities including household refuse, foodstuffs and beer (RG 9.19 p40). NY&A is part of the Anacostia Rail Holdings Company based in Chicago, which operates six freight railways in the USA.

rail brings. This is especially true in an environment which is already severely congested by road traffic.

Rail is often maligned as being too noisy, too industrial, too raw, but the reality is that our overall impact is positively beneficial on a number of fronts; environmental, economic, reduced congestion, and so on.

In your view, what should the rail industry be doing to attract and retain the next generation of skilled staff?

We can improve our outreach to students and candidates. Rail jobs are good jobs. They may not be as 'on trend' as software coding or finance, but the reality is that those jobs exist at railroads, too. For someone who is willing to learn a trade or join a company and develop a skill, the rail sector has many opportunities. Many positions require no post-secondary education, and that's okay, not everyone is meant to attend college or university.

Some positions do require college or vocational level training — therefore we can accommodate people from all walks of life. Our jobs offer competitive pay and benefits. We should be attracting promising talent to our companies and providing them with growth opportunities.

I must also mention the importance of safety. This industry is an unforgiving one. Large equipment and heavy materials require a human interface and considerable concentration and focus. As we do attract and retain our future staff, we cannot allow them to forget how far our industry has advanced its safety focus, nor can we allow them to be content with the current state. Through training, personal coaching, and technology, it is incumbent on current leadership to both encourage safe daily practices and to continue to work diligently toward risk and injury mitigation for our fellow railroaders, our contractors, and the public.

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