Safety still top priority for maintenance

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While deregulation of maintenance services might be more efficient and effective than in-house servicing, it should still preserve the high safety standards of railways, says Michael Walter, CEO of GHH-Valdunes.

THOSE familiar with the European railway industry will agree that gradual changes to decades-old rules are sparking its continuing metamorphosis. However, of all the topics currently dealt with by the sector, maintenance probably ranks highest on politicians and executives' agendas. But why has maintenance emerged as such a top priority?

There are three main reasons. First, maintenance impacts operational safety, with the tragic Viareggio, Italy, accident which took 32 lives in June 2009, and current investigations into possible faults with German high-speed trains' wheelsets, two cases in point.

Secondly, maintenance is increasingly the target of the European Union's (EU) deregulation efforts. Patiently but continuously, Brussels is establishing the laws needed for a more efficient railway market, focusing on transparency and competition. In particular it is paying close attention to the Entity in Charge of Maintenance (ECM), which is the name Eurocrats have given to the company responsible for the design and execution of maintenance, a role that has become more important under the EU Safety Directive.

And thirdly, maintenance services offer potential for very large and rewarding business opportunities. Until recently, maintenance was largely the task of national railways whose liabilities were backed by sovereign states. The likes of German Rail (DB), Spain's national train operator Renfe, French National Railways (SNCF) and Trenitalia had for years decided what to do with their vehicles and were responsible for the safety of their maintenance processes.

A radical change in the legal frameworks though will soon allow third parties to assume this role but potentially with a wider scope. Unlike a national operator, an ECM will be able to operate across the 27 EU member states and will have much greater scope to tap a market, which according to a 2007 study, has an estimated value of €18 billion.

Already we are seeing a shift towards sourced maintenance. While national operators scramble to keep as much as they can of what used to be a protected field, train and component manufacturers are now offering their services as an alternative.

They insist that their engineering skills, productivity, and extensive industry experience are what operators should be looking for in a maintenance contractor. For instance, NTV, the new open-access operator of high-speed trains in Italy, has agreed on a long-term contract with Alstom, the supplier of its train fleet, while Bombardier has signed an agreement in Spain for Renfe's AVE high-speed trains. For components, GHH-Valdunes last month opened its first European wheelset maintenance centre in France.

In our opinion, this evolution is the right direction to be heading. However, we believe that some safeguards must be implemented to avoid risks and to retain the safety of railway operations. It is much wiser to leave maintenance activities to experts who have the experience to perform such tasks or because they have engineered the systems.

The European Railway Alliance, which recommends a mechanism of certification for ECMs, is already a subscriber to

this view and in the legal text for the Certification of ECM, currently being drafted, it proposes a list of maintenance processes and tasks against which any ECM will have to be certified. Some aspects still need to be refined, but the document clearly emphasises at least a minimal level of management expertise. It's a good step.

Let's, however, dig into the details of the relationship between the ECM and the operator.

When a third party contractually commits to provide maintenance for an operator, it endorses, on behalf of its customer, the operational responsibilities of maintenance. But that's only one part of the ECM's role.

Beyond the aspects of fleet management, which guarantees that the right vehicle is brought to a capable maintenance shop at the right time - a challenge in itself - the liabilities linked to maintenance must also be managed. What if a vehicle is not maintained at the right time? What if the maintenance is not performed correctly? Does it really fall under the clauses of a contractual agreement only? We therefore believe that a mandated technical maintenance level should be introduced.

An ISO 9000 type of certification, focusing on system management is, however, not sufficient because safety is too much of a concern. There must instead be an established set of technical requirements such as overhaul frequencies and minimum maintenance operations for components identified as critical for safety. These requirements can be agreed either at the industry level or legally imposed by the regulator, but it is clear to us that the absence of any binding requirements would be hazardous. Furthermore, a European-wide platform to report incidents and collect feedback is essential. This would feed a virtuous loop of improvements to maintenance design, and, hopefully, components and systems.

New players entering into maintenance service will contribute their knowledge and efficiency for the benefit of all. If the step of opening maintenance markets to competition is bundled with a mandatory minimum level of technical skills, we believe railways will remain the safest way to move people and goods.