



On the Right Track? Attracting and Retaining Technical Talent in UK Rail

September 2025

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Methodology

This report presents the findings from the survey *"Attracting and Retaining Technical Talent in the UK Rail Sector"* conducted by Carrington West in September 2025.

The survey aimed to capture the views of professionals working within the UK rail industry on the sector's ability to attract and retain skilled technical staff. A structured questionnaire was distributed to a wide cross-section of industry participants. It combined multiple-choice questions, which allowed for clear quantitative analysis, with optional open-text responses to gather richer, qualitative insights.

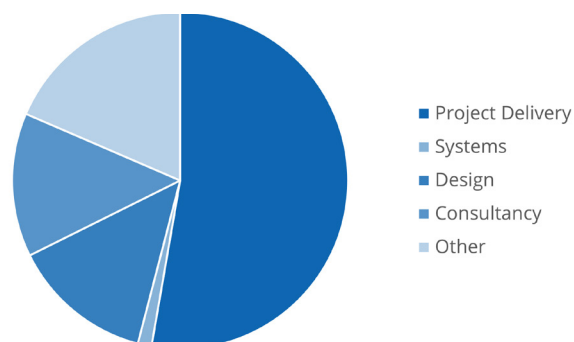
A total of 529 individuals completed the survey, ensuring a meaningful sample size. Responses were carefully analysed to identify key patterns across demographics, career stages, and opinions on recruitment and retention.



Respondent Overview

The respondent group represented a diverse cross-section of the rail industry, offering a well-rounded view of current attitudes and experiences.

In terms of professional verticals, project delivery emerged as the dominant discipline, with just over half of participants (52.7%) working in this area. Design roles accounted for a further 13.6%, while rail systems contractors made up a smaller proportion at 1.3%. Other specialist technical functions were also represented, albeit in lower numbers.



This distribution highlights the survey's strong reach into the operational and delivery side of the industry, where the challenge of attracting and retaining skilled staff is most acute.

Looking at roles and seniority, the dataset captured a healthy mix of technical professionals, managers and senior leaders. Directors accounted for 6.6% of respondents, while technical design roles made up 9.6% and planning/pre-construction professionals contributed 4.3%.

Employment type was similarly varied. Just over half of respondents (52.4%) were employed in permanent roles, while a significant 38.2% identified as freelance or contract workers, and the remaining 9.5% were on fixed-term contracts. This breakdown indicates a high level of flexible and contingent employment within the industry.



52%
permanent



38.2%
freelance/
contract



9.5%
fixed-term
contract

The survey also achieved a balanced spread of career stages. Nearly one in five respondents (18.9%) had between zero and five years of experience, signalling strong engagement from early-career professionals. A further 15.5% had six to ten years of experience, while 18.5% reported between ten and fifteen years. The remainder of respondents had more than fifteen years in the sector, ensuring that the perspectives of seasoned industry veterans were well represented. This breadth of experience gives confidence that the findings reflect the realities faced by both newcomers and long-standing professionals.

Key Findings and Insights

Industry Attractiveness

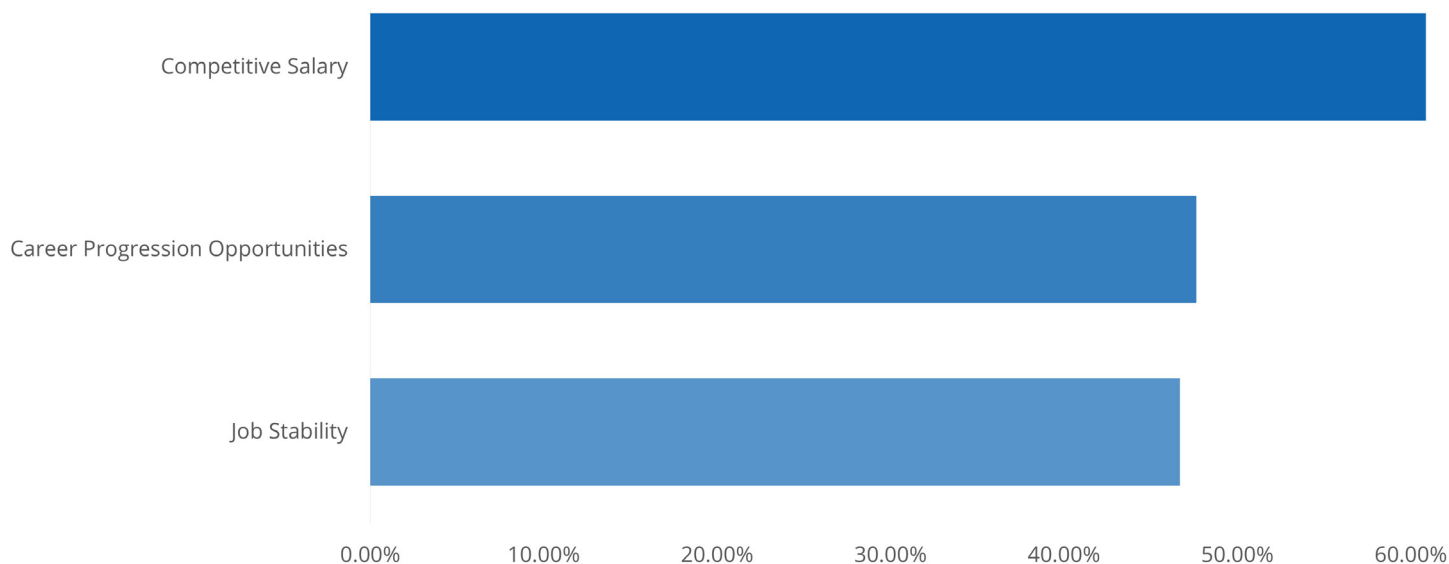
The rail industry enjoys a broadly positive reputation among its workforce. An impressive 79.8% of respondents said they would recommend rail as a good career choice, indicating a strong baseline of satisfaction and advocacy. This suggests that, despite well-known challenges, most people in the sector view it as a rewarding and worthwhile profession.



79.8%
would recommend rail as
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Drivers of Attraction

When asked what attracts professionals to careers in rail, competitive salary emerged as the single most influential factor, cited by 60.9% of respondents. Close behind were career progression opportunities (47.6%) and job stability (46.7%). These results underline that while financial incentives remain critical, long-term career pathways and job security play almost equally important roles in attracting talent.



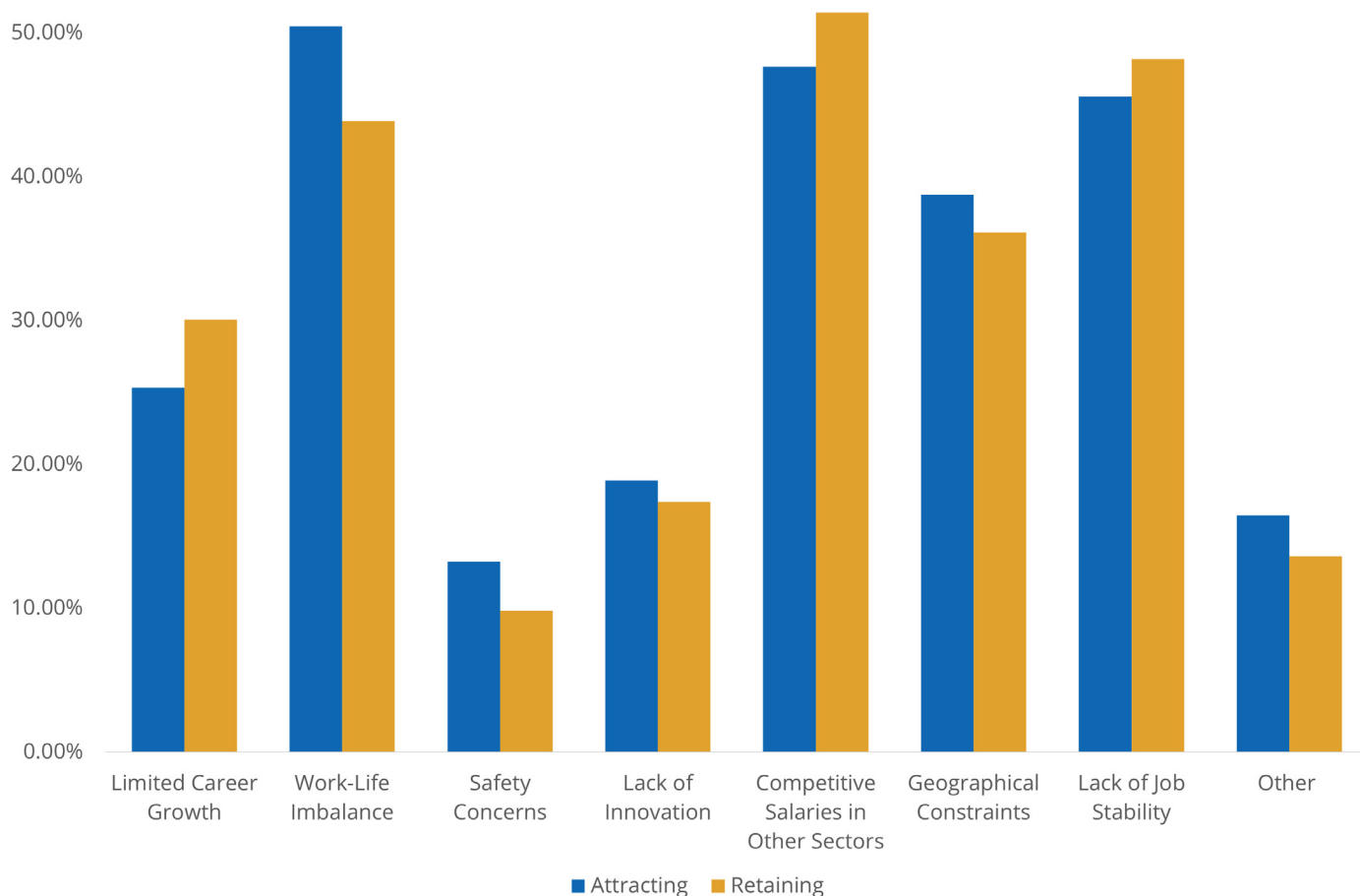
Key Findings and Insights

Barriers to Attraction

Despite the sector's positive reputation, there are significant barriers preventing new entrants. The most frequently cited concern was work-life imbalance, highlighted by over half of respondents (50.5%). This was followed by more attractive salaries in other sectors (47%) and lack of job stability (46%). These findings point to lifestyle and flexibility issues as more pressing deterrents than technical or safety-related fears or wider exposure to career development and innovation.

Retention Challenges

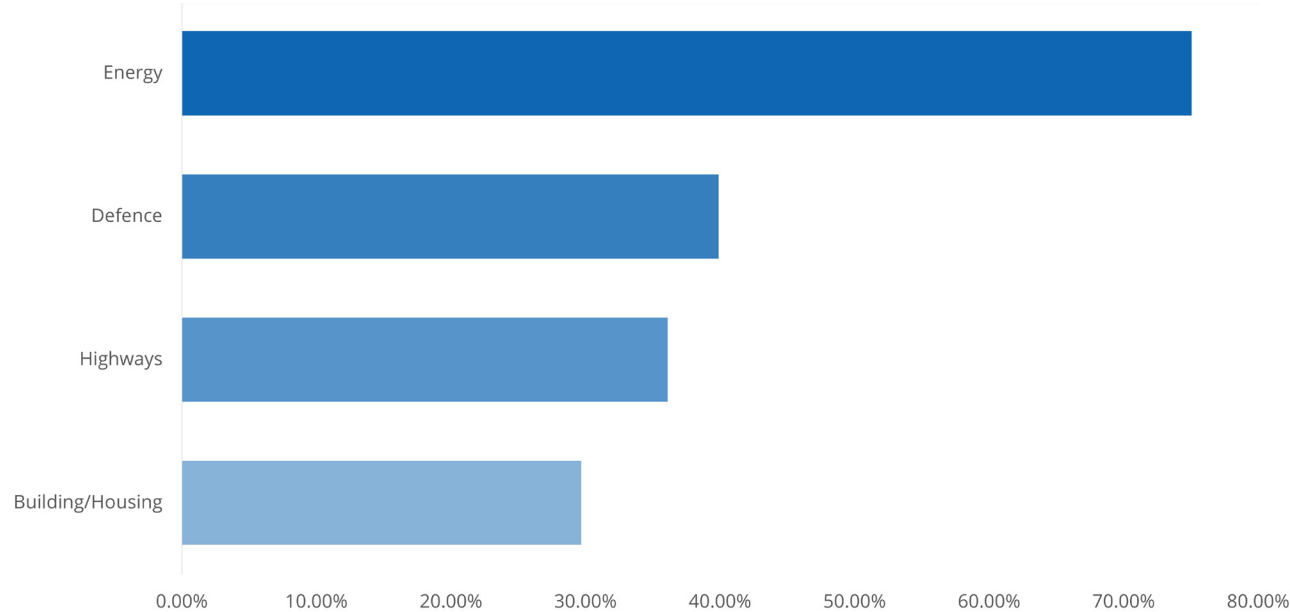
Retention challenges closely mirror the factors hindering attraction. Competitive salaries in other sectors topped the list (51%) with work-life imbalance at 43.9% another key reason why people might leave the industry. Limited career growth (30.1%) and geographical constraints (36.1%) were not insignificant considerations, while safety concerns were less prominent at 9.8%. The close alignment of these results highlights a single, important message: without improvements in career development opportunities and employee wellbeing, the industry risks both losing existing staff and struggling to bring in new talent.



Results Summary

Competing Sectors

Respondents were also asked to identify which other industries compete most strongly for technical talent. By far the highest threat was the energy sector at 75.5%. The defence sector (39.9%), followed closely by highways (36.1%) and building and housing (29.7%) were also cited. These sectors were perceived as offering better opportunities, improved working conditions or higher rewards, making them particularly attractive to skilled professionals who might otherwise consider a career in rail.



Qualitative Insights

Open-text responses provided further depth to these findings. Government investment and job stability were most frequently cited as the reason other sectors such as energy and water were seen as more attractive and offer stability. Many respondents noted that other industries appear to offer greater flexibility and a more favourable work-life balance, with clearer career progression pathways and, in some cases, superior pay and benefits. This reinforces the quantitative results and underscores the need for the rail industry to focus not only on pay, but also on culture, career planning and employee experience.

Why do you think these industry sectors are more attractive to professionals?

- "Better hours, no silly shift patterns"
- "Better pay and less regulations to follow"
- "More innovation, longer term future"
- "Emerging sectors with lots of investment"
- "Use of cutting edge technology"
- "Seen as more exciting, particularly nuclear energy and defence and potentially pay more?"
- "Flexible and innovative"
- "Leadership and ownership of projects are more valued"

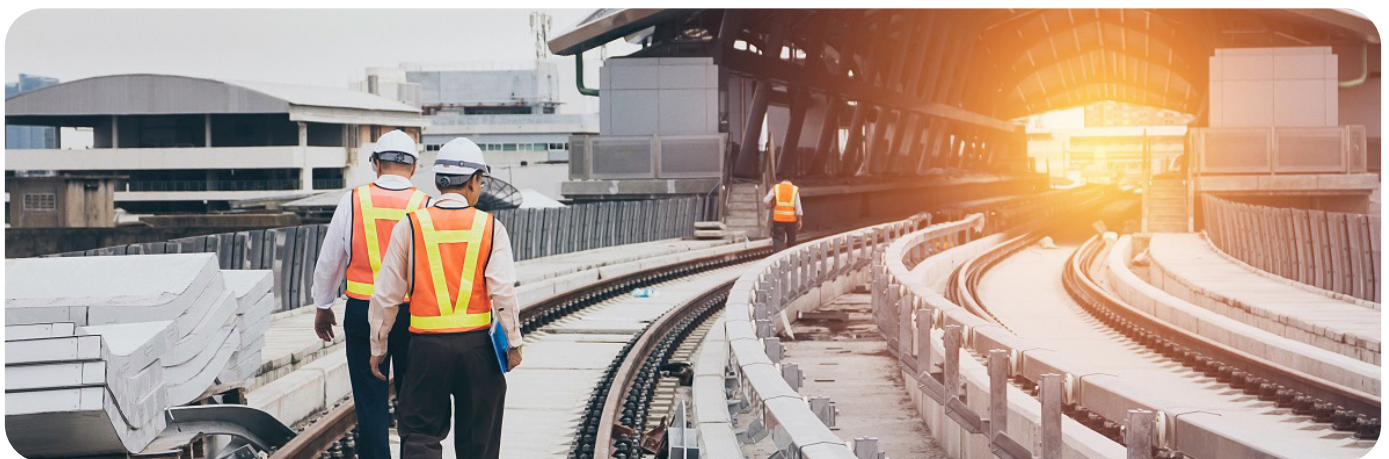
What Do We Need to Do Next?

The UK rail industry retains a strong foundation of goodwill among its workforce, with nearly four out of five respondents recommending it as a career. However, the data paints a clear picture of the challenges that must be addressed to secure the next generation of technical talent. Work-life balance is the most significant concern, both for attracting new employees and retaining existing ones. Alongside this, limited career growth opportunities remain a key obstacle. Competitive pressure from sectors such as defence, highways and housing further intensifies the challenge. These industries are perceived as offering a more modern, flexible and rewarding employment environment.

For employers and industry leaders, the message is unambiguous and there are clear areas where a focus is needed.

1. Competitive salary structures remain important, but they will not, on their own, be enough to win the battle for skills. Benefits, bonuses, wellbeing programmes, team culture and inclusivity.
2. Investment in career development programmes. A holistic approach to career development is essential, and formalised programmes that are clearly communicated will strongly influence attraction and retention. The inclusion of coaching and mentoring, and a blend of learning pathways for new technical skills, support for working to charterships, on-the-job training and wider soft skills development make programmes more attractive to professionals.
3. Transparent progression frameworks. Building on from development, progression opportunity and transparency career pathways can be a quick win, especially when looking to attract early careers candidates.
4. Providing enhanced flexibility remains a focus for the UK workforce, and those in the rail sector are no different. Flexibility in working hours, locations and the benefits offered will enable employers to appeal to a broader and more diverse talent pool, and make them competitive when up against other industry sectors.
5. Employee engagement and feedback. Surveys, closing feedback loops by responding to feedback, and engagement activities are all important parts of people management that many teams or organisations overlook. Providing the opportunity for people to be heard and to demonstrate that you have listened, is a powerful retention tool for any manager and organisation.

The survey results offer both reassurance and a call to action: reassurance that the rail industry remains an attractive career for many, and a call to address the structural issues that, if left unresolved, will limit its ability to compete in a tight labour market.





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