

60 Seconds with Owen Hazel, Commercial Development Director, First Group

Hi Owen, please tell us a bit about your role and your involvement with smart ticketing?

Hi, I'm the Commercial Development Director in FirstGroup's Rail division and I've also recently been appointed as Chair of RDG's Customer Board. I'm a member of Customer Board's Account Based Ticketing working group which is helping to guide the development of industry standards for ABT – I'm passionate about this because I believe it's one of the critical things we need to get right in order to continue to drive smart ticketing innovation in a joined-up way across the industry. Prior to these roles I was the bid director for FirstGroup and MTR's South Western bid, during which we developed the initial plans and business case for South Western Railway's Tap2Go smartcard pay-as-you-go scheme.

What do you see as the key benefits of smart ticketing for rail customers?

For me, one of the key benefits of smart ticketing is that it removes the need for customers to collect their tickets at the station before they travel. Without smart ticketing, customers typically need to add a buffer of extra time to the start of their journeys – and they need to err on the safe side just in case there is a large queue at the ticket office or collection machine. So smart tickets allow customers to save time and plan their journeys more effectively, which helps to make their journeys easier and rail more effective as a mode of travel.

What do you see as the biggest challenge to realising these benefits?

I think it is industry coordination – from getting common barcode and card reader infrastructure installed across the network through to sorting the standards and back-office systems that will allow new products to be developed and introduced. To encourage innovation, enable interoperability and reduce the time needed to introduce new products, we need to continue to work together on these common elements and avoid having to duplicate effort or reinvent the wheel in order to get new products introduced.

As a customer, what would be the one piece of innovation you'd like to see in the rail industry and why?

As a customer, I want to see operators introducing genuinely new smart ticket product ideas and being more experimental with what's possible using smart ticketing technology. I know this is easier said than done – one of my frustrations is that as an industry we are not great at conducting genuine trials of these new ideas (due to the high development costs, difficulties in removing products that aren't widely used or aren't working, etc.) – that's why I'm a fan of adopting a coordinated approach to ABT standards – with a view to making this sort of innovation much simpler to deliver.