

SOUTHERN RAILWAY

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Matt Watson, HR Director, Southern Railway

BACK ON TRACK



In February 2008 the Commercial Director of Southern Railway departed, leaving vacant what is a key post for the organisation. HR Director Matt Watson was relatively new to the railway industry, and used the vacancy as an opportunity to review and learn about the market.

Harvey Nash had already mapped the rail industry recruitment market for Southern Railway's parent company Govia. "So we used some of that work as a starting point, and from there it seemed logical to use Harvey Nash for the search," recalls Watson.

He was impressed from the start. "Their specialist knowledge set them apart from other more generalist search firms," he recalls. "That gave them a clear view of the challenges we faced and informed our thinking about how to develop the role itself. They weren't the cheapest, but they added real value in helping us make this critical appointment."

The role required someone with knowledge of quasi-public sector/government contracts and, given that the company employs nearly 2,000 people in a retail environment, experience of large-scale people management.

"Finding someone with that unusual mix of experience was going to be difficult. Harvey Nash suggested we look at the transport sector generally (and specifically the airline industry), then leisure companies and the hospitality industry," says Watson.

- The departure of its Commercial Director left Southern Railway without a key member of staff, and it turned to Harvey Nash for help
- Harvey Nash had already mapped the rail industry recruitment market, and this specialist knowledge allowed them to quickly draw up a shortlist of candidates with the unusual mix of skills required for the role
- The successful candidate joined in September

But getting someone with the right cultural fit was equally important. "We are very open and honest commercially, and we mix strong collegiate-based working with a high level of professionalism. Harvey Nash consultant Tim Hartley and his team spent lots of time discussing this cultural fit with me and our Managing Director Chris Burchell. Indeed, getting under the skin of an organisation is something they seem to be very good at."

The job spanned a broad and challenging marketing, customer service, contracts and people management remit. But Harvey Nash quickly came up with a strong shortlist of eight. Burchell selected four candidates to interview, three of whom were so good that he was, he says, almost spoilt for choice.

The successful candidate, Alex Foulds, worked at Tube Lines – the public private partnership that runs half of London Underground. He was appointed at the end of May and started his new job in September.