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Engineering solutions for transloading automation

We speak to Robert Tasker, president & CEO of TransRail Innovation Group, about how the company is engineering a safer and more efficient ecosystem for shipping commodities by rail.

Robert Tasker, president and CEO of TransRail Innovation Group (TRIG), says the company exists to provide rail tank car visibility “from the inside out. We do that by engineering solutions for transloading automation, to help companies ship commodities more safely and efficiently.”

To that end, the company has developed and implemented automated closed-loop transloading solutions at multiple customer rail terminals, which Tasker says “saves time, saves money and saves people.”

TRIG solutions save time as operators do not need to open the manway hatch to vent and depressurise the car, or to manually determine the amount of residual product (heel) inside. Their solutions save money because operators no longer have to open the manway which also reduces costly gasket repairs and replacement. Additionally, TRIG solutions save people from the effects of exposure to toxins; opening the manway releases potentially toxic vapors and is also the most common cause of non-accident releases (NARs). TRIG’s approach makes the process infinitely safer by using radar technology to achieve automated heel detection and level measurement, which means load volume can be maximised and the pump can be shut down automatically – all without opening the rail tank car.

As to what’s next for the innovative operation, Tasker says it is continuing to expand its customer base, its technology, and its solution set for its clients: “As we offer custom solutions, every day we are helping our clients to expand their capabilities, their operational safety, and their bottom line.”

This, he says, presents the industry

with possibilities: “One of the exciting developments is the recent changes to the Federal Railroad Administration’s (FRA) regulations allowing the transportation of liquified natural gas (LNG) in rail tank cars.”

Currently, TRIG is developing a complimentary solution for pressurised cars and has formed a Customer Advisory Board: “We are collaborating with industry experts in LNG transportation by rail to define required solution capability to effectively meet their needs. We know these needs range from safety to compliance, and from cost efficiency to commodity throughput, as well as process automation, but are there other issues and subtleties that we can address in order to better serve the industry? This is what we’d like to know.”

This attention to detail and ability to be at the forefront of innovation is something Tasker feels very passionate about. He says that the company’s aim has always been to be a technology leader in rail. And now, he says, they are. He adds: “Rail is a highly regulated industry, with many safeguards to mitigate the risk of any significant accidents. As a result, there are few technologies or companies certified to provide innovative solutions. Certification is a rigorous process designed to demonstrate a provider’s capability to understand, engineer, build, and install without presenting new risks to the industry. We did that.”

TRIG is now the only electronics manufacturer in North America certified to build and deploy sensors to measure inside operational tank cars. How did they achieve this milestone? “With a 100% focus on innovation,” says Tasker.

On a personal level, he says he has always been interested in making



Robert Tasker, president and CEO of TransRail Innovation Group (TRIG)

change for the better: “There is no better opportunity than innovation to do that. But sometimes innovation takes courage. For many years I worked for large telecommunication companies. I remember, at one of the companies, we were taught to understand that innovation takes courage – to stand behind your ideas and help people through change. It was always a value I took to heart.”

And that courage is something Tasker says he still has to have today, even though he’s now focusing on technology for a different industry: “It takes a whole new type of courage and determination to build certified technology solutions in a conservative industry, like rail transportation. It also takes a lot of support from my wife, friends and relations. But I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

What fuels this love for rail? “Well,” he says, “transportation at the scale of the rail industry is no small feat, keeping people safe and getting the job done over 140,000 miles of rail track, every single day of the week, is a huge job. It is a very impressive industry.”

He names Trinity Rail in particular



as a company doing great work: “What they are doing is very interesting and admirable from an innovation perspective. The fact that they also understand the opportunity presented by TRIG’s capabilities and certifications is important for the rail industry.”

So, with all this love for the industry, what advice would he give to someone wanting to follow his path into it? “Technology adoption typically takes longer than expected in any industry. That being said, TRIG has found that with a consistent focus on rail and a dedication to building customer-centric solutions, we have continued to lead our industry towards automation. Success comes by creating opportunities and then having patience to stay focused on meeting the needs of our clients while sharing our passion for innovation.”

TRIG is certainly in the ascendance at the moment, so it seems that along with his co-founders, Marvin Trimble and Peter Stunden, Tasker’s hard work is now really paying off.

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