

The life of... an RAIB Inspector

So what is it like to be an RAIB inspector? I thought I would ask one of my colleagues to explain how the job feels to him. This is what he wrote:

What does the life of an Inspector look like?

It isn't easy to describe the life of an inspector, one day is rarely the same as the next and it won't suit everybody, but the hard work is certainly matched by the unique opportunities and satisfaction the position provides.

So what about the day job? Well, inspectors lead their own investigations and, because accidents and incidents are so varied, there is no catch-all template to follow. This means inspectors have the freedom to manage their own time and way of working. Obviously all silver linings have a cloud, and the consumption of late night oil rises with the level of stress in the period before one of the many peer reviews intended to put the lead inspector on the spot. This rigorous review process underpins the high quality output the RAIB is known for and of course it is always preferable to know the answer before a difficult question is asked!

Although most aspects of the railway industry are represented within the branch, an inspector doesn't always lead an investigation in their own area of expertise. Most inspectors embrace the opportunity to experience a different part of the industry, a reward which is unfortunately rare in the modern railway. This allows potential safety learning to be disseminated across the industry and the support of other inspectors will always be there to fall back on if assistance is needed.

Investigation work is predominantly witness interviewing and technical investigations, but there is also some analysis of process and, of course, familiarisation with standards. The branch covers the whole of the United Kingdom from the two offices, but investigations are not always split geographically, so a typical working week usually includes travelling the country to follow up lines of enquiry, often at short notice.

What are your favourite and least favourite things about the job?

It is the very nature of our work which means we meet with people to discuss what is probably one of the worst days of their life, and blending personal empathy with professional detachment can be very emotionally challenging at times.

It also cannot go without mention that the on-call commitments do eat into your home life. The RAIB operates a roster putting each inspector on-call for, on average, one week in every three. When on-call, you must be ready to deploy 24/7 with 30 minutes notice, remain within an hour of the office and of course stay away from alcohol! Being on-call is a commitment and will be a bigger compromise for some than others, but it beats being stuck behind a desk and you cannot ignore the adrenalin rush when arriving on the scene of a freight train derailed down an embankment!

What advice would you give to anyone considering becoming an inspector?

Most inspectors only leave the RAIB when they retire, for me this is because the variety and flexibility of the job is unmatched, but it is not a job for everyone. It is a job for those with an inquisitive mind, an eye for detail and who can perform at short notice in what can be difficult circumstances. For those that thrive in that environment it is an incredibly rewarding and enjoyable 'day' job and for me I can genuinely say I look forward to work, even on a Monday morning!