



A man who loves a challenge

INTERVIEW BY PAUL HUTTON

Lee Woodcock is Director, Highways & Transportation at Atkins. Paul Hutton chatted to him about his background, why a degree isn't essential to make it in the industry and how ITS will form a key part of future smart cities



So Lee, one thing I think people ought to know is that you like a bit of a challenge, is this true?

You could say that! I'm married with four daughters (smiles). Or did you

Above: Lee Woodcock, Atkins' Director, Highways & Transportation

mean the UK Challenge (<http://www.ukchallenge.co.uk/>) that I completed in the summer with colleagues from Atkins? I think it's fair to say both have their challenges but also hugely rewarding. Our team (pictured above) embarked on a weekend of physical

and mental endurance at the UK Challenge in Snowdonia. The team, known as the Atkins Avengers, were one of the 62 teams and 372 participants to take on the challenge to raise funds for the Dame Kelly Holmes Trust and it was certainly no mean feat!



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UKCHALLENGE

Snowdonia
3 - 6 July 2014

Because business is a team challenge



That said, hugely rewarding, so much so a group of us have arranged a mini version in the Lakes for the end of October, so if you see me hobbling around that will be why!

I raise the UK Challenge because team working in usual circumstances and challenging conditions has parallels with some of issues we are debating this month in the Atkins Investigation on Collaboration, something easier said than done.

Q So how did you get into the industry?

I joined through an apprenticeship at Traffic Signals Co-Operative Limited from school thanks to family connections. I spent time learning the ropes from cleaning traffic signals in York, to installation and maintenance

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and repair of PCBs at the depot. I also completed a Higher National Diploma (HND) on Electronic and Electrical Engineering on day release.

Q Which year was that? I ask because by the Eighties apprenticeships were dying out and people were trooping off to University to get degrees. What made you choose the different route?

Now that is going back, it was 1988. You are right, I think we were seeing the back end of the Youth Training

Above: the Atkins Avengers at the UK Challenge in Snowdonia



Right: Eighties-style YTS apprenticeships

Schemes around that time and the focus was very much on the pure education route. It's fair to say I didn't really excel in school education (my parents would support that view!) so I had to do something that played to my strengths and engaged me. I found that in the workplace and also through the HND education.





At the end of the apprenticeship and the HND, I had the option then to go on and do a degree but chose to leave the comforts of home in Rotherham for a job as a Traffic Signal Designer for Essex County Council, quite a difficult step at the time but worth it in the long run.

Q Have you faced any, for want of a better word, discrimination as you climbed the ladder?

There has been the odd occasion or eye brow raised in terms of 'you haven't got a degree', but in reality the sector has been quite good at recognising people for their results, the outcomes they deliver and I see this more so today and it's fantastic to see the sector through the recruitment of Professional Apprentices, we are doing our part in Atkins but we are not the only one, there are many organisations doing likewise and recognising the value and diversity that can be achieved as a result.

Q So I always like to ask this, for our younger readers if nothing else, what's changed through the years?

It would be so easy to respond to this in terms of technology, but actually I think the most significant change, and it's still emerging, is about collaboration and the underlying behaviours that are so important. I couldn't necessarily put this down to one single factor and in truth there will be many.

Our clients are moving towards more collaborative delivery models and we are seeing value and innovation start to occur, this is happening through organisations that are typically 'competitors' but also through the engagement of academia, Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and the creative sector. I do think we are at the tip of the iceberg in this regard and those who can truly collaborate, partner and demonstrate the right behaviours will succeed.

Q Now you asked in the last Atkins Investigation, Is ITS Dead? Did you really think it could

“ We need to be prepared for change, so what we do is integrated, focused on customers, efficient and sustainable ”

be or were you just trying to be a bit cheeky and stimulate a debate?

Hmm, good question, can I dodge that? I guess not! No, I don't think it is dead but I do believe it needs to change. It has a real opportunity to meet emerging client needs through the development of new innovative products, solutions and services, as I highlighted earlier this needs to be done working collaboratively with partners and also through engaging different sectors.

Q You're very much into collaborative working and underlining that technology doesn't work in isolation. Is this something you find easy to convince clients, and what real world examples do you have?

I think the sector is still coming to terms with what collaboration really means and how value can be created through mutually beneficial relationships and that you have to invest time in making it work, but I haven't really come across that much resistance, build trust early and you have a fantastic platform to build upon.

In terms of real world examples, the Essex ITS partnership is a good example for me, a joint effort

Real world example: Atkins' joint ITS effort with Siemens and Essex County Council



between Essex County Council, Siemens and Atkins that lasted for 13 years and delivered over £8m of savings in the last 5 years of the contract thanks to some re-aligning that focused on outcomes not just on outputs.

A more recent example is our work with Transport for London (TfL) on Surface ITS, a ground breaking technology-led change programme that is defining the future operating model for road space management. Collaboration is at the heart of this future model but also in the delivery of the current phase of work where we are engaging a range of partners from across the sector but also adjacent sectors such as defence to ensure we have the right expertise at the right time.

Q If I gave you the interviewer's magic wand, what would you change in the industry?

Hmm, good question! Where to start, it could be business models, use of technology, tendering processes, innovation, talent development, etc. That said, I think one area which would benefit is ensuring we are tackling the benefits of diversity as part of our growth plans across the sector!

Q And what will change, where are we going and what should people be prepared for?

We are going to see massive global growth in mega cities and this will create opportunities for us all to grow our businesses, develop talent and get involved in interesting and challenging projects.

We also have opportunities in our existing cities closer to home together with changing expectations of customers, customers who will see transport as a utility, a means to an end to fulfil and experience, be it work, leisure, tourism, etc.

We need to be prepared for change, so what we do is integrated, focused on customers, efficient and sustainable. If we do this the UK will be well placed to capitalise on the Transport Systems Catapult's estimate for a global market of £900bn for Intelligent Mobility.