

A joining of minds

Drew Ritchie, Amey, (left) and Charles-Albert Giral, SECO-RAIL.



Amey-SECO, a 50/50 joint venture between Amey and SECO-RAIL, approaches the 10th anniversary of its formation and celebrates a highly successful partnership that has safely delivered plain line track renewals in the Western Territory. Amey's Drew Ritchie and SECO RAIL's Charles-Albert Giral, the two Managing Directors leading and directing Amey-SECO, discuss its achievements.

Although both very different in character and born in different countries, Charles-Albert and Drew have a host of things in common. The duo are actively involved in the development of their respective companies within the rail sector and both have been instrumental in taking their organisations forward in addressing the significant challenges facing the rail industry today.

How did Amey-SECO start?

Drew: It really started from nothing in 1997. Both companies had an interest in establishing a track renewal operation in the UK, but had no specific resources at that time. A small team was set up and in six months was delivering £25 million of track renewals per year. Charles-Albert is best placed to talk about this since he was part of that team.

Charles-Albert: Back in 1997, SECO-RAIL brought to the JV its track renewal expertise, drawing on more than 60 years' experience on the continent. Amey brought its local

knowledge drawing especially on its earlier acquisition of the Western Infrastructure Maintenance Unit. It was a very challenging time because, as Drew said, we started from scratch, but we did it.

What makes Amey-SECO so successful?

Charles-Albert: It makes me think of the Italian minestrone soup: the more different ingredients you add, the better the soup tastes. Through the years, Amey and SECO-RAIL added their various ingredients to this rich mixture. Network Rail made a significant contribution with the successful introduction of the Integrated Management Team (IMT). Now we are about to enhance the flavour further with the addition of other ingredients drawn from our recent acquisition of the Anglo-French group AMEC-SPIE.

Drew: The business culture that underpins Amey-SECO is indeed very important. Despite our very different corporate and personal backgrounds, we have worked hard to strengthen our alliance by just getting on with the job in hand and working as an integrated team. We are not adversarial and are well known for our open and honest approach and, as we do not tend to publicise Amey-SECO, our strength and cohesion are often underestimated. If a major problem or issue should arise, and this does happen from time to

time, there's no finger-pointing or blame culture. We work as one team to put things right and get back on track again.

It is interesting to look at the set-up in Bristol, the HQ for Amey-SECO. It's virtually impossible to work out who works for Amey, SECO-RAIL or Network Rail. How does this work?

Drew: That is exactly the point. All people assigned to the IMT work for IMT, not Amey, SECO, or Network Rail! This has many benefits, the main one in my opinion being one of trust which is imperative if an IMT is to work well. We are totally open with Network Rail having unrestricted access to financial information as well as all operational plans. There is a joint commercial team and a shared risk pot, which has done away with disputes and all final accounts are resolved the month after the job is completed. Even our control centre is manned by staff from Amey-SECO and Network Rail.

Charles-Albert: Since the beginning, it has become clear that the closer we work together, the better the results we achieve. In the early days, before we became truly integrated, our performance was not nearly so good. The team realised that in order to be successful, everyone had to be flexible in their approach and had to get rid of any blame culture. We are unique in this respect. Amey-SECO and

Network Rail work very well together and have done away with man-marking.

Drew: Of course, through the learning process we were able to make changes in our approach to work to the benefit of both the client and indeed our own staff. Once a problem has been identified and dealt with, we spend time looking at the causes to see if there are any opportunities for change, which in turn will lead to improvements. A very good example of this is the development and use of the 'sleeper spacer'. This equipment was designed to make the movement of heavy sleepers safer and more efficient. The sleeper spacer is now used across the rail sector and is significantly safer for the gangs at work and also time-efficient, a benefit to the client. This is exactly the type of thing we work very hard to improve upon and, dare I say, have done so successfully over the years.

Charles-Albert: We have also reduced our costs year on year and that is through examining processes and procedures and looking at alternative systems of work.

Can you demonstrate any other areas where improvements have come from lessons learnt?

Charles-Albert: I think safety is a perfect example. Safety is always at the forefront of our minds. We work hard never to be complacent and to do everything we can to protect our people, our supply chain partners and other stakeholders. We have introduced a number of initiatives with Network Rail including the 'red and yellow card' system, industry method statements, alternative fencing, and the sleeper spacer that Drew mentioned previously. I am proud to say that many of these initiatives have now been adopted as best practice in the industry at large.

Drew: Like many contractors we have key performance indicators and we monitor these to ensure that all incidents, near misses and accidents are reported. This is absolutely crucial because, if this information is not forthcoming, it is impossible to improve or learn. Every year, we undertake a JV safety culture survey in which all of our staff participate. As a result of the feedback we have received, we are introducing an action plan to introduce 'visible felt leadership' to managers, supervisors and workers. This is a new methodology for addressing attitudes and behaviours and we hope that this will strengthen our safety culture even further. Amey-SECO has also helped to improve industry standards, sharing its safety processes and helping to drive forward efficiencies.

Charles-Albert: Another area is innovation. We are currently developing a plan to increase the amount of track laid, reduce the unit rate and improve the quality of the track handed back. On the continent, high output methods are commonly used and our team is using this expertise to import well proven techniques to the UK market. Last year, as part of this plan, we successfully introduced a new highly-specified ballast cleaner on the network.

What does the future hold for Amey-SECO?

Drew: Well, we are very keen to continue to work together. We have developed what I believe is a successful team with a 'can do, will do' attitude to work. We intend to continue to develop our resources and, most



importantly, our people. We have an ongoing programme to recruit at all levels including trainee technicians and graduates. I would like to think that we will also continue to encourage our teams to work closely together through more combined workshops, production meetings and so on.

Charles-Albert: Investment is also vital to our success and our two parent companies have both invested heavily in the rail industry. SECO-RAIL through its acquisition of AMEC SPIE Rail in the UK and SPIE Rail in France and Amey through the acquisition of Owen Williams. These three acquisitions strengthen our combined capability and ensure that we are able to offer our client a unique 'end to end' service i.e. design, development to implementation with the support functions of S&T E&P and plant provision, all under one roof. Of course, there is also the financial strength that both organisations have through

their parent companies. Ferrovia with over £8 billion turnover and Bouygues with £18 billion are two of the largest and most successful construction and service groups in Europe.

Finally, could you describe any highlights of your personal working relationship?

Drew: Charles-Albert and I share a keen interest in rugby union and skiing. You will appreciate that the upcoming Rugby World Cup is likely to provoke some interesting exchanges of views. Things might become just a little bit tricky if France and Scotland were to meet in the final!

Charles-Albert: Drew is a gentleman and I am sure we'll handle the situation in the most amicable manner. I just hope France and Italy do not end up in the final. My Italian mother has a very limited sense of fair-play on such occasions!

