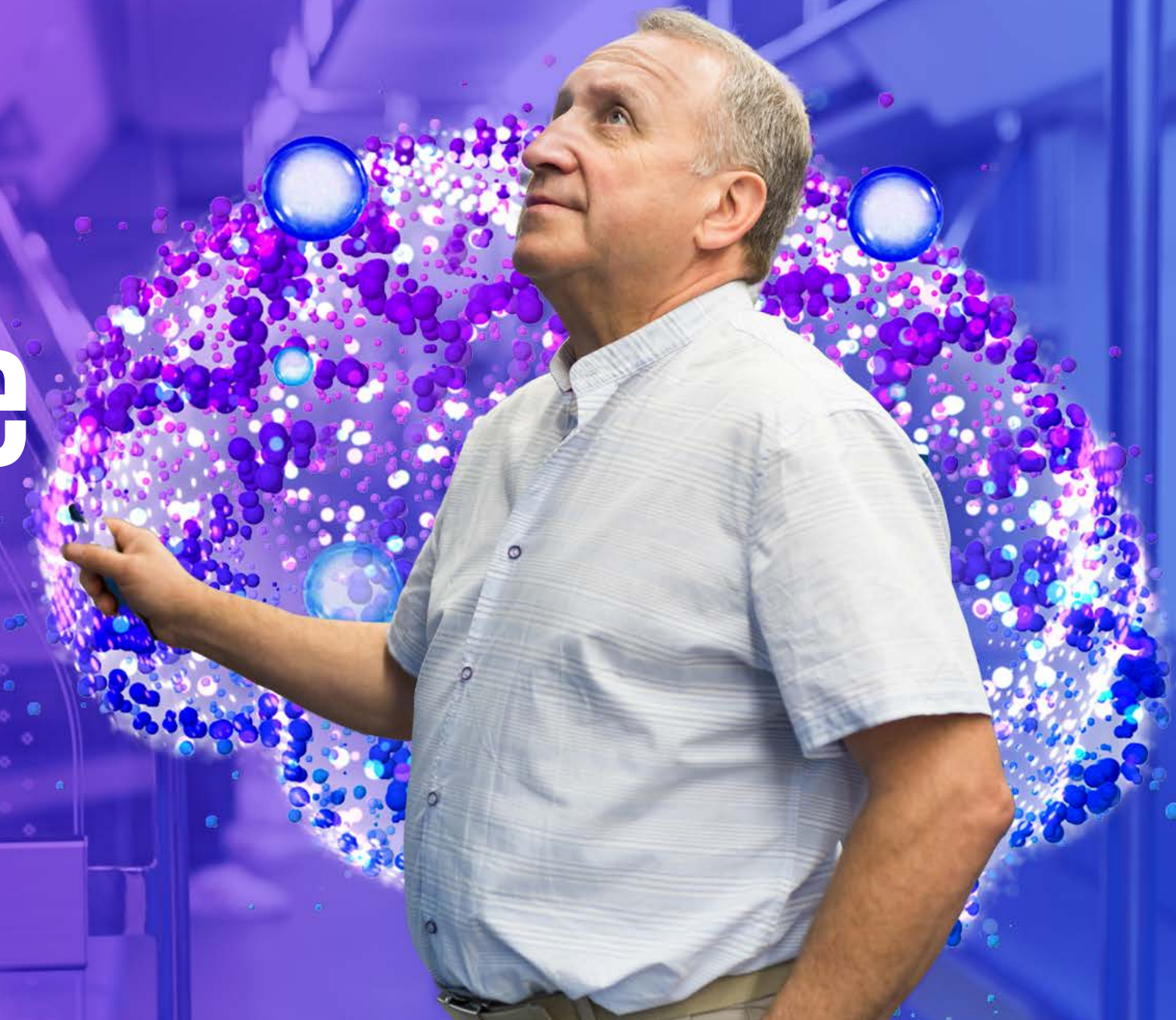




Voices of experience

Train operator

Citizen Experience Excellence 2024-25



Train operator: First class customer experience



One of the UK's largest train operating companies that is a leader in terms of its levels of customer satisfaction puts its strong CX performance down to a number of key factors.

Customer at the heart of organisational culture

Organisations often talk about the importance of having a customer-focused culture – but at this train operator, it is genuinely embedded. Structurally, the Customer Experience Directorate includes key stakeholders in operational roles too, meaning that customer experience is placed at the heart of all aspects of how the service operates. Customer is the golden thread, with CX belonging to everyone.

A customer culture is also championed from the very top. From the MD himself down, leaders travel frequently on the service and their first act on boarding the train will be to go and talk to the crew and see if there is any way they can help. They will stand with the crew at the doors of the train to greet customers; even the MD has had specific training to assist customers with accessibility needs at the station.

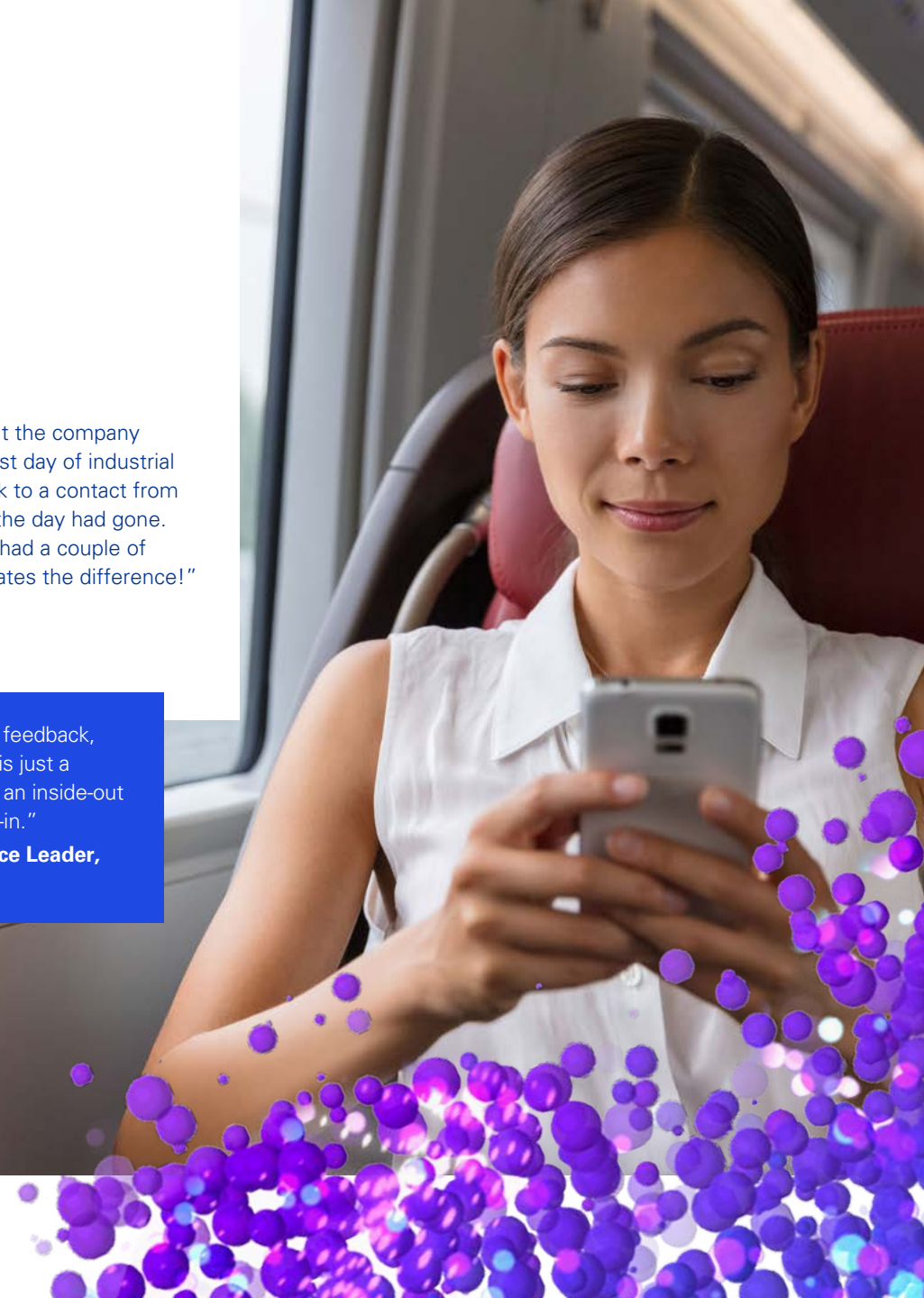
This culture came to the fore during the period of national rail strikes that began in 2022. Leadership rolled up their sleeves and helped run services, meaning that there was at least a limited service every day during the strikes.

The Senior Customer Experience Leader at the company recalls working a 12-hour day on the first day of industrial action. "The next day, I happened to speak to a contact from another train operator. I asked them how the day had gone. He said they'd all stayed at home but had had a couple of catch-up calls. To me, that really encapsulates the difference!"



If you don't act on customer feedback, then your satisfaction rating is just a number, it actually becomes an inside-out measure rather than outside-in."

**Senior Customer Experience Leader,
Train operator**





Outside-in

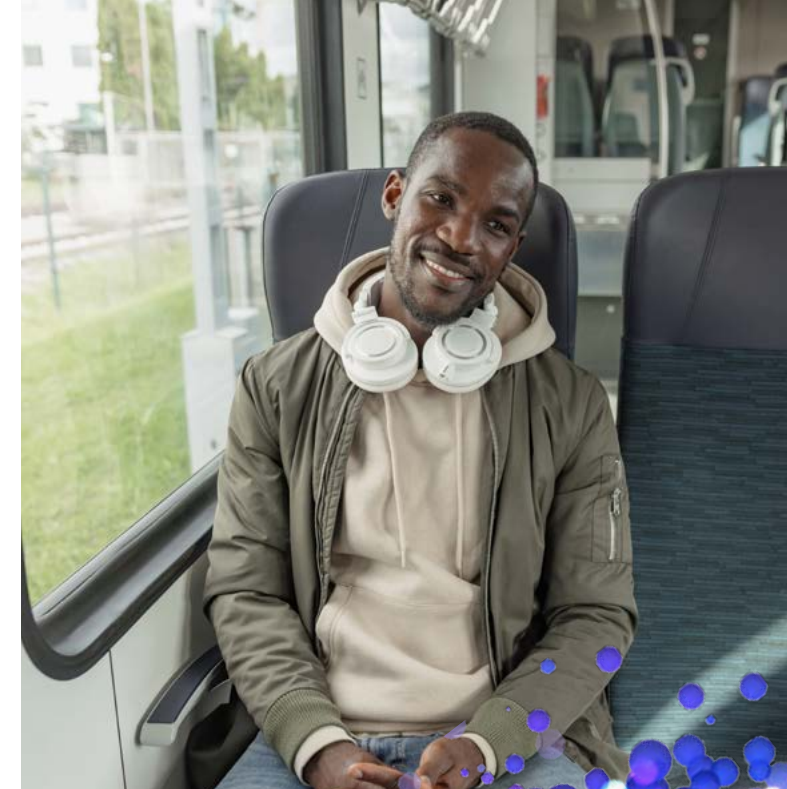
The operator is also a big advocate of outside-in thinking – seeing everything from the customer’s perspective. This comes not only from the usual array of customer surveys, forums and panels (including on disability and accessibility), but from digging deeper into the customer experience and, crucially, acting on the results.

“We all know that punctuality and reliability of the service, for example, are critically important. But what does it actually mean to customers if their train gets in late? What are they travelling for, and so what are the knock-on impacts? We try to understand this at a granular level and act upon what we find. If you don’t act on customer feedback, then your satisfaction rating is just a number, it actually becomes an inside-out measure rather than outside-in.”

Knowing the customer

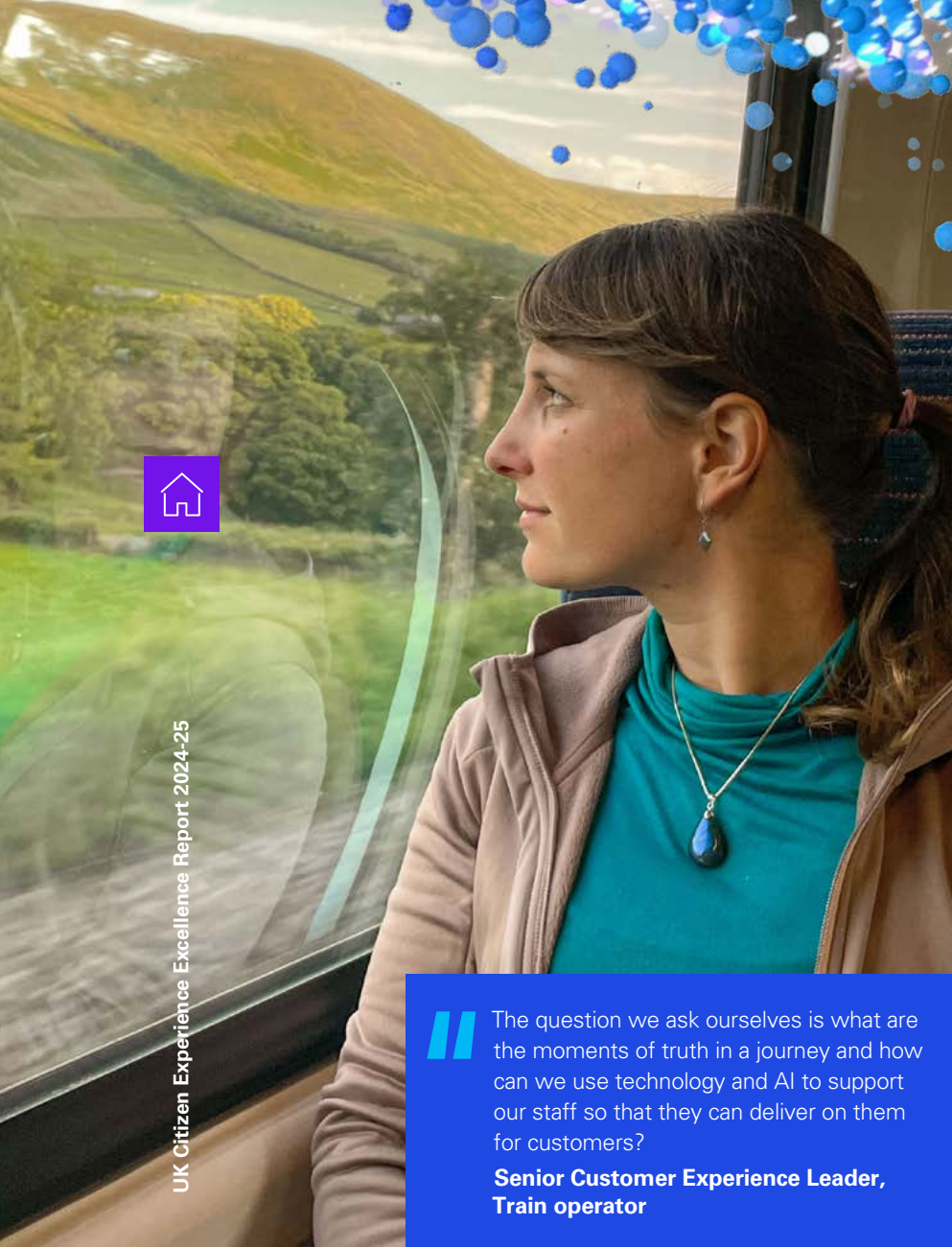
Needless to say, there are challenges and areas where the company wants to do better. One of these is really knowing their customers and increasing personalisation. Only around 30% of customers book their journeys directly with the operator, with the rest using services like Trainline or other third parties. With those who book directly, the company can personalise the experience through regular communication and offers. It brings other benefits to customers too – such as the “Delay Repay” service where if a train gets in over half an hour late, the customer will automatically be compensated. But it can’t do this as easily or quickly for those who have booked via third parties.

“For years, we’ve been trying to drive up our direct booking figures so that we can personalise more. However, recently we had something of an epiphany – and decided that we needed to get closer to the other organisations our customers are booking through’. That way, we may be able to offer automated benefits like Delay Repay to customers through the customers preferred channel – we’d need more data to be shared, but it could be quite a ground-breaking development.”



“If you don’t act on customer feedback, then your satisfaction rating is just a number, it actually becomes an inside-out measure rather than outside-in.”

**Senior Customer Experience Leader,
Train operator**



Issue resolution

Inevitably also, things can go wrong, and services can become disrupted. A high proportion of the operator’s passengers travel for leisure and discretionary reasons, rather than commuting to work, and also travel quite infrequently. This means that their journey feels quite special to them, and makes the quality of the experience even more important.

“In that context, when things go awry, it means that our recovery efforts need to be quite special too. Our customer relations team will pull out the stops to get a customer to their final destination – wherever that may be. We are prepared to invest in recovery when the circumstances warrant something a bit special. It feeds into our general philosophy that no one will be challenged about doing the right thing for the customer.”

Transport integration is another challenge. Many customers’ journeys include using other services for some portion of their travel. And the company does not directly manage the great majority of the stations on their network. Integrated transport is due to be one of their key focus areas for 2025/26.

Digital and AI supporting ‘moments of truth’

And what of technology to improve the customer experience, including AI? The operator has a Digital Experience (DX) Head of Strategy, who collaborates closely with the Senior Customer Experience Leader. Alongside the usual offerings of an app to make and manage bookings – and an app under development specifically for those with neurodiverse conditions – the company is leveraging AI in a number of innovative ways. This includes AI-driven delay predictions that help stations anticipate issues and advise customers in advance, and AI-assisted predictive ordering of food supplies, based on prior patterns, to ensure that the menu options customers want are available. A live seat occupancy sensor system is being developed which means empty seats can be sold or resold – but also that train crew will be able to direct customers to vacant seats, improving customer service.

“The question we ask ourselves is what are the moments of truth in a journey and how can we use technology and AI to support our staff so that they can deliver on them for customers? That’s what it should be geared around. In my view, colleagues are the heroes – and digital is the sidekick that supports them.”

“ The question we ask ourselves is what are the moments of truth in a journey and how can we use technology and AI to support our staff so that they can deliver on them for customers?
**Senior Customer Experience Leader,
Train operator**

Top tips

So what key advice is there for others?

"You have to be completely genuine in your focus on the customer. It can't be lip service and lots of charts. Be very clear about what you want to achieve and what the benefits will be. When you can demonstrate success, you will get more attention and earn more trust from leadership and/or your owning group. Don't obsess about what you can't do or don't have funding for – focus on what you can do and always keep the customer experience in view."



Click here to read our full 2025 UK Citizen Experience Excellence Report – **The public service experience, redefined: Remember me. Recognise me. Respect me.**





Some or all of the services described herein may not be permissible for KPMG audited entities and their affiliates or related entities.

kpmg.com/uk/citizenexperience

© 2025 KPMG LLP, a UK limited liability partnership and a member firm of the KPMG global organisation of independent member firms affiliated with KPMG International Limited, a private English company limited by guarantee. All rights reserved.

The KPMG name and logo are trademarks used under license by the independent member firms of the KPMG global organisation.

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to address the circumstances of any particular individual or entity. Although we endeavour to provide accurate and timely information, there can be no guarantee that such information is accurate as of the date it is received or that it will continue to be accurate in the future. No one should act on such information without appropriate professional advice after a thorough examination of the particular situation.

The views and opinions expressed herein are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of KPMG International or KPMG member firms.

CREATE | CRT159472 | April 2025

Document Classification: KPMG Public