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Problems with Single Employee Train Crew Operation

There is an abundance of reasons why two crew members are necessary on a train.

1. Most significant of all of them is that a single crew member will get no reminders from a second crew member of 1) slow orders 2) work orders 3) block signals 3) road crossing mechanical failure, or other restrictions for the movement of their train. With single person operations the engineer is on his own. An engineer is a human being who invariably makes mistakes. The application of existing federal regulations and railroad rules require that the conductor remind the engineer of all of the above and more. Going to a single person operation eliminates all redundancy in the cab to assure rules compliance and the safe operation of the train.
2. Routinely train dispatchers give instructions (mandatory directives) to train crews that restrict their movement that an onboard crewmember must copy down on paper and repeat back to the dispatcher. The practice today is that no one at the controls of a moving train or locomotive is to copy a mandatory directive, so this job is done by the conductor. With a single employee crew a train would be required to stop to copy the directive, tempting railroads to pressure a lone employee to copy "on the fly".
3. Backing up a train would be impossible with a single person crew.
4. Without a second crew member to assist the train operator, an endless number of distractions would come into play. The lone crew member would now not only have to operate the locomotive, but would also have to do all of the talking on the radio, not just with the train dispatcher, but with signal maintainers, gang foremen, other train crews, etc. And the single crew member would be responsible for all paperwork including the train's manifest and the position of all hazardous materials in the train. Currently these duties fall to the conductor alleviating the train's engineer from the multi-layered distractions that this work can cause, taking the engineer's attention away from the immediate task at hand – running the train.
5. With a single employee crew, valuable mentoring time would be lost. Conductors oftentimes work for years gaining valuable understandings of the signal system, operating rules, air brake system, etc., before they become an engineer. Without the two person crew, this extensive training will be lost, and the remaining employee will be less trained, less professional, less seasoned, and less safe. The lack of two employees in the cab means a lack of informal conversation, reflection, storytelling, discussions of rules and signals, etc. Much of the learning that takes place every time a railroad worker goes to work is in the cab of the locomotive, as the two employees share their collective knowledge, experience and wisdom that each has acquired over the years.

6. When a train encounters a signal more restrictive than clear (green), railroad rules demand that the engineer "call" this signal to his/her conductor, who acknowledges the signal. (Some railroads require that *all* signals be communicated in this fashion). Without the second crew member, there is simply no one there to acknowledge the signal, and one of the oldest operating practices in the industry would simply be cast aside as unnecessary.
7. In order to properly secure a train a sufficient number of handbrakes have to be applied to hold the train without the aid of the train's air brakes. This involves getting out of the locomotive and going from car to car and tying hand brakes, and then returning to the cab of the locomotive then releasing the air brakes to see if the train does not move. If the hand brakes do not hold the train, the operator must tie more handbrakes and repeat until they *do* hold. Since the operator cannot leave the locomotive until the train is secured it's an impossible feat to accomplish with one crew member.
8. The possibility of crime against train crews would increase, as thieves and vandals will no doubt become aware that trains are being operated by a single employee. A lone worker, in the "middle of nowhere", or in a "tough" neighborhood late at night, the single operator is extremely vulnerable, especially once s/he is outside of the cab of the locomotive. If s/he encounters a problem, there might be no one for hours who is aware that s/he is in trouble.
9. National Security. Since 9-11 we have heard endless speculation about the possibility of terrorism against the nation's railroads and trains. Since it is impossible to patrol the entire railroad on a regular basis, the government and railroads rely on railroad workers to notice and report suspicious activity. Single person crew operations would reduce by half the number of workers in the field looking out for suspicious activity. The lone train operator having absorbed the duties of the second crew member in addition to running the train -- cannot be relied upon to see even a fraction of what might be out there along the right-of-way.
10. Currently railroad operating rules require a complete and thorough "job briefing" between members of the crew at the beginning of each tour-of-duty and when conditions change during the course of the trip. With a single employee crew, there can be no job briefing as there would be no other crew member to brief with.
11. Twelve hour runs are common in the freight rail industry. The vast majority of these runs are unscheduled and oftentimes crews are required to report for duty unexpectedly and are not adequately rested. Over the course of a 12 hour overnight run crew members get tired, they lose alertness and oftentimes involuntarily fall asleep.

With two crew members there is an interaction that combats this inevitable fatigue. They keep each other keep alert to ensure that the train proceeds safely and as required by our complex operating rules. If railroads go to single person operations catastrophic accidents will quickly bring our industry fatigue problem into focus and government will have to act to address this long neglected problem.

12. If a single person crew member suddenly becomes ill, has a heart attack or stroke there would be no one to assist him.
13. For the lone crew member operating over the road, even simple things can easily cause them to be distracted. Getting lunch from the refrigerator, retrieving a dropped pen from the floor, grabbing a coat from his bag, looking up a specific rule -- all of this becomes a far more significant hindrance and a distraction to the lone crew member than when he has a partner to lend assistance.
14. Most railroad operating rules have a napping policy. Given the lack of scheduling on most railroads and the nature of freight pool and extra board work, the railroad has allowed train crews to take naps when the train is stopped and secure, but only one crew member is allowed to nap at a time. Short naps are a vital tool in combating fatigue on overnight 12 hour runs. With a single employee operation, the employee would be denied, by rule, the ability to nap and fatigue becomes a far greater safety issue.
15. When an operating employee returns from vacation or other extended period away from work, the territory can at first seem unfamiliar. The worker may often feel a bit "rusty". Having that second crew member there can be of great assistance to reorientation to the territory. In addition, upon returning to work after such an absence, things may have changed – operating rules, special instructions, physical characteristics, etc. Given the complex nature and myriad of rules and procedures that operating crews are subject to, it is easy to miss vital information. Once again, having that second crew member present who in all likelihood has been on the job while the other was absent, adds a layer of protection against a possible oversight by the train operator.
16. Currently when emergency situations arise, a two-member train crew can act efficiently and effectively to deal with the emergency. Fighting a tie fire, dealing with a road crossing collision with a vehicle or pedestrian, and in numerous other scenarios. With a two person crew, one crew member stays behind to attend to the train's safety and security while the other assists directly with the emergency. With a lone employee, there would be no other crew member to attend to the emergency at hand. When dealing with train-vehicle and train-pedestrian incidents, the lone crew member could not go back to assess the situation, assist the injured, "cut" (make a train separation to open up) a road crossing, etc. without first securing train, which may take an hour or

more. And while securing the train and dealing with the emergency situation, the crew member may not be able to quickly receive or transmit valuable information to the dispatcher. Thousands of such incidents take place each year resulting in property destruction, injury and death. Without that second crew member on hand to quickly assess the situation, accurately inform the dispatcher/emergency services of the nature of the incident and take expedited action, additional harm to property and human life will be the result.

17. Currently, train crews are expected by rule to give a visual "roll by" of other trains when meeting them and alert the other train's crew of any abnormalities or unusual occurrences (shifted loads, hot wheel bearings, derailed wheels, etc.) Since the single crew member cannot leave the cab of his train unless it's secured these roll bys will have to be done by looking out the window of the locomotive and most defects will continue on undetected.
18. Train crews are on duty all hours of the day and night for up to 12 hours at a time. In contrast truck drivers are limited to 10 hours on duty and they can pull over and rest when they need to eat, drink or rest. Truck stops are available 24/7 every 50 miles or so. In addition, truckers are on a highway with other motorists and when an emergency services are required, they are not far off. Train crews work longer hours and have none of this support infrastructure available.

The only safe train operation is one with a certified conductor and a certified engineer.