



Beginners' guide to interoperability

Interoperability is such a familiar feature of everyday life that we don't realise how much we know about it. We buy a new hairdryer or electric drill without even considering whether we will be able to plug it in at home: we know it is interoperable. And equally we know that if we took it to France, we wouldn't be able to plug it in without a special adapter: UK electrical designs are not interoperable with French ones. Kitchen units come in standard sizes, and kitchen white goods are generally designed to fit into their standardised spaces - or is it the other way around?

Interoperability of computers is equally familiar: the introduction of the USB port means that almost anything can be attached to anything else and it will work safely and properly. Interoperability increases consumer choice, opens markets, facilitates innovation, and drives down prices - all benefits that we want for the railways.

Explore the pages on this website to find out what 'interoperability' means for UK railways. Some general examples of definitions of the word 'interoperability' are listed below, to give you an idea of the general context.

Interoperability is the ability of a system or a product to work with other systems or products without special effort on the part of the customer. Interoperability is made possible by the implementation of standards.

Interoperability is the ability of one manufacturer's equipment, compliant to an agreed standard, to operate in harmony with the same type of equipment from another manufacturer.

Interoperability is **not** the same as interchangeability. A hairdryer is not the same as an electric drill, although both are interoperable with their power supply. And interoperability defines only the interfaces, not the overall design of the item, which, for example, may or may not fit in the available space.

Contact the DfT Interoperability team at: interoperability@dft.gsi.gov.uk.

For related documents, pages and internet links, see the column on the right.