From the President: moving with the times

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From the President

Moving with the times

A launch event will be held at the beginning of March at St Pancras International station in London, to celebrate the Institute becoming Chartered. The venue was chosen carefully. Steve Barraclough will say at the reception that St Pancras is “…a place where so many journeys have begun.” Gilbert Scott’s gothic masterpiece and the adjoining station have a fine history, having changed considerably with the times since the first train arrived into St Pancras in 1868. With expansion, decline, the closure of the Grand Hotel in 1935, bomb damage in 1941, St Pancras has more recently transformed to become the magnificent international transport hub it is today. Important themes during the reception will be the Institute’s own proud heritage, the wide ranging and important contributions of EHF to modern life and issues we expect to be tackling in future.

Thinking about the future prompts me to highlight two significant challenges raised by contributors to our journals. Among papers shortlisted for the Institute’s Liberty Mutual Award this year is Hancock’s article ‘Automation: how much is too much?’ In his treatise, Hancock highlights a drive to automate because we can, not because we should. He argues for a more intelligent, purposeful approach to automation, giving greater heed to achieving collective, positive human experience. Driverless cars will be mentioned at the reception. My mother, still driving in her mid-80s, depends on this mobility to live an independent life to the full. She is finding driving increasingly difficult however, and for her, fully automated vehicles would be of great benefit. For my son though, in his early 20s, learning to drive and having his own car have been a hedonistic rite of passage. Addressing the consequences of ever more automation presents dilemmas for EHF in achieving artful compromise between widely conflicting user needs.

In 2009, Straker and Mathiassen asked the question “Increased physical workloads in modern work – a necessity for better health and performance?” These authors reasoned that addressing growth in sedentary work and its detrimental effects on health requires a shift from the traditional ergonomics paradigm of reducing risk by reducing physical loads. How then should EHF develop its approaches to function allocation, task, job and system design, in order to achieve good work and good jobs? Ought we to follow Barbieria and colleagues’ suggestion in January’s edition of Ergonomics that office workers should clean their own offices?

There are other major EHF issues on the horizon of course, those arising from population change, climate change, renewable energy generation and the evolution of manufacturing, for example. As we begin our journey as a Chartered Institute, our discipline and its paradigms need to continue to develop with the times. We might reflect on the words of Albert Einstein: “The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”

Best wishes