

“BE OPTIMISTIC, BOLD AND STRONG”

Christian Haas joined PTV as chief executive in November last year after a career spent on the technology side of the financial services industry. Adam Hill asks him about how the transport and mobility industry will be reshaped in the wake of the global coronavirus pandemic

W hat do you think transport’s reaction to Covid-19 tells us about the industry and where we might be headed in future?

That’s the key question: where we might go from here, absolutely. We see a lot of changes, specifically from Covid-19, happening in the industry in the last two months. If I were to summarise, it has led to much stronger thinking ‘out of the box’ in terms of sustainable mobility concepts. There are not many good things about Covid-19, obviously. But in terms of the industry, I’d say it’s been an accelerator for products and solutions.

If you look at what we have done, what other companies have done, what cities and public authorities have done – for example, about Bogotá [in Colombia] expanding cycle lanes - I think that’s all great stuff. The question is, how sustainable it will be.

If I look at the public sector in cities, generally what has happened is that people realise even stronger the need for better technology and digital solutions in order to create more sustainable infrastructure and mobility concepts within their cities. When cities open up for bike lanes and greater space for pedestrians, you need to manage that - you need to understand where you do it and how you do it.

While we’ve got quiet streets and pedestrian-friendly walkways and more cycling and cleaner air, the global economy is facing collapse. So we can’t stay here - but can we take some of the positive aspects of what we’re seeing at the moment in terms of pollution and congestion, and perhaps homeworking, and move forward with those? Or do you think people will just rush to get back to where they were pre-Covid-19?

When you open up space for pedestrians, for example, I very much hope that people start to see the many advantages; Nordic countries were actually doing that before Covid-19 quite successfully. Children can play on the streets, there are so many

“ Digitalisation is something which was quite on its way already in the ITS sector, and I think it will gain a much stronger momentum ”

great things about it. What we learn is how good things can be if you reallocate space for different kinds of mobility, that includes pedestrians as well as bikes. But whether that results in a 'new normal' is a different question. What I do see currently - and that's why I'm a bit careful with talking about a 'new normal' case - is that, with a lot of people, I don't really see a change of behaviour: they behave like there is no Covid-19. But certainly, the longer it's going to take, the more it is going to force people - and that includes cities and public authorities - rethink, rewind and re-evaluate what's currently happening.

Do you think that, with public transit in particular, there will be an avoidance problem, post-Covid-19, because people will be worried about infection? There may even be an increase in use of private cars. Falling ridership will not suddenly just increase, simply because the crisis is over?

Well, that depends on the learning curve we just discussed. There has been a dramatic drop in public transportation: Deutsche Bahn is a good example, with the rate dropping to 10-15% of normal. But I'm pretty sure that's going to move up again, because it is just a great means of transport. On the other hand, you know, we do see electric cars specifically going up, which I think is also great. If lockdown is going to go on longer, it might result in a change - but if it was over in a month's time, there's not going to be dramatic change. But I hope that if people realise about reallocation of space within cities [for other transport modes], there's a less need for personal cars.

I hope that public transport, sharing modes, et cetera, will go back to normal. We mentioned opening up space for bikes and I think that, generally, is something we need to do. If you look at Europe, for example, now is the time when it starts getting warmer. You've got Covid-19 everywhere, but the weather is also one of the reasons why use of bikes has gone up dramatically at the moment. Look at e-scooters and micromobility: one of the reasons is that bikes are just less expensive than scooters at the moment - but I'm pretty sure that e-scooters will come back as well, because they're just a cool means of transportation in the city. As we come out of the crisis, there will probably be a lot of consolidation. Companies

face quite an economic challenge at the moment. I mean, there's so many companies out there, which generally is great, but I think due to the fact that many were just starting, and with the limited financial strength, that ultimately leads to consolidation we'll see across the transportation industry.

What sort of form do you think that consolidation could take?

We've got many technology companies out there that deal with mobility in transportation. There are companies like PTV and a lot of start-ups. And what we've seen after the 2008-09 financial crisis, there was a lot of consolidation in that industry. Obviously Covid-19 does have already an economic impact, and it will most probably have one in every industry - including ours. Therefore, I think if you are a stronger, larger player, that's not so much of a problem. But if you are a small start-up, that's a different topic.

Do you think there are any small steps that cities could easily take, perhaps encouraged by what they've seen during this crisis? So not necessarily wholesale change?

Just closing down the streets completely and reallocating space for pedestrians, obviously doesn't work in a post-Covid-19 world as it does right now. But if we change on a smaller basis, at least then you could have a bigger next step. And so that's what I hope for.

I think in all cities currently there's a shift within their perception regarding the different mobility modes. We've seen those changes before, you know: less cars, more public transport. So it represents a great opportunity for cities to rethink - specifically the reallocation of space giving more to bikes, for example. I think that's something which really is a step cities will be strongly considering going forward and acting on. Existing infrastructure [for some cities] is a challenge, because you need to rebuild basically. That also applies to other forms of micromobility, more space for e-scooters and pedestrians. But let's see - because I'm still afraid that, as long as the pain point is not high enough or strong enough, there's a natural resistance to change. And again, that depends on how long Covid-19 is going to be with us. →



Toronto's empty downtown streets are typical of cities across the world during lockdown

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