60 Seconds with … Tim Rowe



After an electronics apprenticeship with UK NATS and a couple of years fixing radar displays, Tim got release to university to study Electrical and Electronic Engineering. From there he went on to line management of airport ground systems and then to the NATS safety management team.

He subsequently moved to a succession of consultancy companies before setting up as an independent consulting engineer. He obtained long service awards from two of his employers, demonstrating his ongoing commitment to avoiding job interviews, and picked up degrees in Computing for Commerce and Industry and Humanities with English Language along the way.

He thought he retired a few years ago, but a former client persuaded him to come out of retirement for another job, so it turns out he is still available for work if it looks sufficiently interesting and doesn't involve too many early mornings. He is active in SCSC working groups, particularly the Data Safety Initiative Working Group and he was instrumental in restructuring and editing version 4 of the Data Safety Guifance (all three parts!)

What first attracted you to working in the field of System Safety?

It was by accident! I had a natural flair for breaking things from an early age. When acceptance testing of new equipment included free testing, I turned out to be good at exposing weaknesses. My team thought that put me in a good position to write the safety cases the equipment. Of course, there's not much connection between those two things, but there I was working out how to manage system safety and discovering that I enjoyed it. And I like to think I turned out to have some aptitude.

What aspect of your career are you most proud of?

That I have no fear of flying. Obviously, that's mainly not me; aviation safety is a huge and complex affair. But I'm proud to be even a small part of it.

Tell us one interesting unusual fact about yourself!

Everything about me seems ordinary to me! People used to be surprised to see me doing embroidery in the crowd at music festivals, but nobody seems to find that unusual now.



What advice would you give to yourself age 12?

It gets better.

What future changes would you like to see in the field of System Safety?

I'd like to see a widening of the idea of "safety" from the narrow focus it tends to get of just physical harm to the person (and in some fields, the environment). But hazard identification can identify financial, political, reputational effects and more that it would benefit an organisation to address. Whether that's by taking safety to include a wider range of harms or just improving communication between the safety team and other teams, I think there's a lot that could be gained.

What's your most favourite quote or motto?

I have a T-shirt with the text "*If only reading burned more calories…*"

If you could learn to do anything, what would it be?

It would be great to learn to play a few more of the musical instruments I keep buying at music festivals.

"One of the biggest challenges with safety engineering has always been social, or political if you like: persuading the right people that safety management is actually needed at all"

If you could be any fictional character, whom would you choose?

Carrot Ironfoundersson, from Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" series. Everyone knows he's the rightful king, but he doesn't try to claim the title because he knows he can do more good as a captain in the city watch. I like that attitude. I'm also jealous of the easy and natural way he gets to know everyone and gets on with people.

How do you see the rise of Artificial Intelligence affecting the future of safety engineering?

My first reaction is to ask, "which of the many, completely different, technologies marketed as AI? But on reflection, it doesn't matter much. All forms of AI can only act as part of a system – even agentive AI needs a connection to the outside world. And all of them can give wrong results (some AI technologies more often than others). And in safety engineering, we're used to building acceptably safe systems out of elements that are to some extent and in some ways unreliable. AI technologies might change the ways and the extent, but I think we'll still be doing what we've always been doing. And one of the biggest challenges with safety engineering has always been social, or political if you like: persuading the right people that safety management is actually needed at all. I don't see any signs of that challenge going away either. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Tim can be contacted at digitig@gmail.com if you want to discuss anything from work to embroidery patterns!