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Former Virgin executive to head centre

By Brian Groom, Business and Employment Editor

Will Whitehorn, a former senior Virgin Group executive, is to chair a government innovation centre being created to devise integrated transport systems for export in a global market predicted to be worth £900bn by 2025.

It aims to develop systems that inform people and businesses about when, where and how to travel – seen as an opportunity because a threefold rise in people and freight movement is forecast by 2050.

Travel planning applications – apps – and traffic management systems are in existence, but limited in scope. The idea is to unify systems so that complete information is available on best times and ways to travel by road, rail, sea or air.

The centre will start by linking existing systems, starting with the Network Rail, Highways Agency and London Underground models. It is one of the technology and innovation centres known as “Catapults”, where businesses and researchers work together on innovative products and services.

Mr Whitehorn is best known for his role in establishing Virgin’s rail franchises and more recently as president of Virgin Galactic, the space commerce and tourism venture. He said the transport industry “has the opportunity to be world-beater and able to give people in the UK an experience of travel that is world-class at the same time”.

David Willetts, science minister, said the Transport Systems Catapult would “make sure that new and emerging ideas to improve transport systems can be pioneered here and exported across the globe”.

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