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Pressure on construction industry

 By Robert Wright, Transport Correspondent, FT.com site
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The builders of CrossrailCross-London Rail Links will face serious problems starting work on the east-west rail line while work is under way on a wide range of other London rail projects, observers warned on Friday.

Work is due to start in 2010, so the first two years' construction will be carried out during the expected building boom before London's 2012 Olympics.

Cross London Rail Links, the public organisation due to build Crossrail, will be keen to avoid the mistakes made during construction of the Channel tunnel, Jubilee line extension and other projects that ran seriously over-time and over-budget. Instead it will seek to emulate projects such as the high-speed Channel tunnel rail link, poised to open on time and on budget in November, and the regular extensions to London's Docklands Light Railway, which have also had a remarkable record of being built at the planned cost.

Rupert Brennan Brown, a veteran rail industry observer who previously worked on Crossrail, said it was an "extremely brave call" to start construction on Crossrail at a time when the construction industry would be fully mobilised by the Olympics, the upgrade of the north-south Thameslink cross-London line, refurbishment of the London Underground and building of new developments in the Thames Gateway, among others.

"There's a . . . risk the supply industry could over-heat," he said. "I think there must be concerns in the industry about being able to deliver suitably qualified people to do this magnitude of work."

Bent Flyvbjerg, a Danish academic who has studied the problems encountered by large infrastructure projects worldwide, said Crossrail was particularly risky because it involved tunnelling under a big city, one of the riskiest types of building work.

Problems about tunnelling were important in cost over-runs of the Jubilee line extension. The intended tunnelling technique was expensively abandoned, replaced by an alternative after a tunnel being built with the method on the Heathrow Express rail link collapsed.

"You never know what you'll come across," Prof Flyvbjerg said. "It's particularly an issue in built-up areas."

Prof Flyvbjerg said it was paramount to ensure the project started with a realistic budget. Large infrastructure projects have been prey to promoters' tendency to be over-optimistic about costs and likely revenues.

It could also be a good idea to appoint as contractors on the scheme a team that succeeded in a similar project - such as the team from [London & Continental Railways](#) completing work on the UK's first dedicated high-speed rail line - Prof Flyvbjerg added. European Union procurement rules sometimes prevented this because they mandated that promoters choose the cheapest bid.

The immediate concern remains to secure parliamentary approval - the stage at which the last Crossrail project fell in 1994. Rail freight operators plan to oppose government plans to take away some space in the timetable on lines at the east and west ends of Crossrail to give it to new passenger services. Lord Berkeley, chairman of the Rail Freight Group, has promised to oppose the bill in the Lords until those provisions are scrapped.

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