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APPLYING GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICES: HIRING, TRAINING AND EVALUATING EMPLOYEES



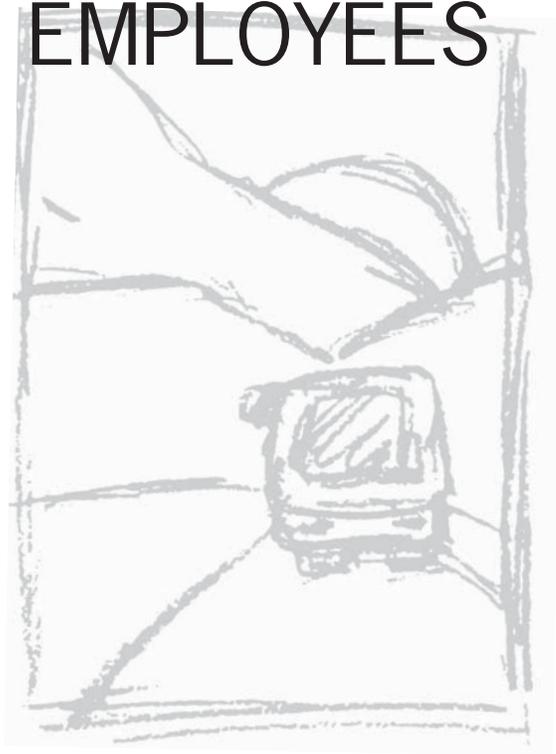
One of the most effective ways to improve an organization is to recruit, hire and retain the right people.

This is especially true for community transit systems where quality service and customer satisfaction are daily commitments. But how do community transportation systems identify and recruit great people? And how can managers motivate and empower good employees so they will stay with the system? This brief will discuss strategies for identifying, recruiting and interviewing prospective employees. Also, it discusses employee training and development, performance appraisals or evaluations, and employee rewards. It is a companion to the technical brief, "Leading the Rural Transit Organization."

HIRING: MORE THAN JUST PLACING AN AD

Finding the most qualified people for community transit requires more than placing an ad in a newspaper or on a Web site. The quality of the services that your system provides largely depends on the quality of your personnel. While you can often train people to master the driving, dispatching or supervisory skills required of community transit, it is difficult, if not impossible, to instill customer service values in people who do not possess them.

There are several steps that can increase the likelihood of finding a good match for each



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position in your system. It starts with writing a job description and includes recruiting, identification of the criteria needed for the position, a uniform selection process and skillful interviewing.

The Job Description

Job descriptions are an important tool in an organization because they drive all other human resource activities. A well-written job description helps attract the right kind of applicants and discourages people from applying who do not meet a transit system's needs. It provides a basis for assessing how well an applicant's strengths match the requirements of the job. It can also help protect your system against unfounded personnel complaints or discrimination charges by providing documentation of job requirements.

A complete job description outlines the following:

- Title
- Summary of the position
- Duties and responsibilities
- Employee qualifications
- Physical and environmental requirements of the position
- Level of supervision required

The heart of the description is job tasks, identifying in a concrete way the tasks or duties required. Avoid words that do not tell specifically what the employee does, such as "handles," which a supervisor may interpret differently than a driver. Also, try to describe the desired outcome of the work, rather than the method for accomplishing it. For example, instead of the task-oriented, "writes down pick up times," you might say, "accurately records pick up times." One important reason to be very specific about the essential functions of a job is to protect yourself and your employees when hiring and recruiting persons with disabilities, making sure you are honoring the civil rights protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

For each task, you might consider identifying the physical set up of the job; the physical demands of the job, if appropriate; performance expectations and whether the task is an essential or non-essential function.

Some transit systems make the job description part of a recruitment package. These packages include information about the selection process; working conditions, pay and benefits; pre and post-employment requirements, such as criminal checks and drug and alcohol testing; and about the transit system itself, including its mission, values and goals.

The recruitment package is an opportunity for the system to present itself as a desirable place of employment and also to provide a realistic preview about what the position entails. This full disclosure of information has the advantage of screening out candidates who may not be able to meet the minimum requirements or not be able to pass driving or criminal background checks. Conversely, good descriptions of the job, the benefits and the mission of the system could attract quality candidates who may not have considered a career in community transit.

Effective Recruitment

Advertising in local and regional newspapers is the most common method of attracting community transit personnel, but systems employ a variety of recruiting methods, including posting job openings and recruitment packages on their Web sites.

Betsy Kachmar, former Indiana RTAP coordinator, and Otis Reed Jr., president of CONTRANS, Inc. held a workshop on attracting quality applicants at the Community Transportation Association's 2003 annual meeting. They advised listing job openings in multiple categories of the "Help Wanted" classified ad section, including under such categories as "care giving," "customer service," and "social services."

Transit systems have found that larger advertisements typically produce more applicants, as do ads that are run more frequently. Also, ads that are written to sell have more potential for attracting the attention of applicants.

An example of an attention getting ad was produced by Tri-Met in Portland, Oregon. A small headline says: "Tri-Met is hiring bus drivers." A larger headline follows with: "Come for the Benefits; Stay for the Opportunities." The ad briefly describes the benefits and the job requirements and tells applicants how to apply.

Common mistakes in advertising are: using too many words or transit-specific language that applicants may not recognize, leading with uninteresting labels, such as "drivers wanted," and compressing ads into small amounts of space.

Including customer service as a preference or a requirement in your ad is advisable. But avoid listing personality traits, such as, "likes working with people." Candidates are apt just to repeat what's listed in the ad during the interview. Instead, use experience to screen for desirable candidates. An example: "experience working with senior citizens or persons with disabilities desired."

For recruiting ideas beyond the local newspaper, consider the following:

- Tap into your personal and professional network. Tell everybody you know – friends, neighbors, vendors, and business colleagues – that you have job openings and are looking for good candidates. If you learn that neighboring systems are reducing services, contact their personnel office to find out if they would post your openings or notify people being laid off about your openings.

- Utilize your internal resources. Post announcements on your Web site along with downloadable application forms. Place decals on the back of your vehicles, advertising the position and a number to call for more information.
- Establish an employee referral program. Encourage employees to refer new applicants and offer cash incentives or inexpensive gift certificates for referrals that result in a hire. One transit system that tracked its referral program for two years found that persons referred outperformed those not referred and that the system was much more cost effective than newspaper advertising.
- Staff a table at a local job fair. This type of exposure will help you recruit employees as well as serve as good community advertising.
- Post notices at community sites. Notices at recreation centers can attract young retirees or volunteers. Place driver openings at local Department of Motor Vehicle offices.

Keep in mind that increasing the quantity of applications does not guarantee higher quality job seekers. Some systems are establishing tracking mechanisms to gauge whether certain types of recruitment methods produce better quality applicants than others. A common approach is to ask the person at the time of application how he or she learned about the position.

Hiring Criteria and Process

There are various ways transit systems can organize their selection process to increase the chances of identifying the right person for the job. It is useful to have a checklist so that all candidates are treated uniformly and so that they understand everything that is required.

Application Review

Has the candidate completed the application in full and provided all required documentation, (e.g., some systems require driver applications to include a copy of the his or her driving record.) Application forms that are incomplete or carelessly done may be an indicator of poor or inconsistent performance.

Employment History

Does the candidate have a stable job history? Can he or she authorize the release of prior employment information and provide specific supervisor names and contact information? Transit managers believe that past performance is a reliable predictor of future performance, and some systems have standardized procedures for reviewing employment records and checking references.

References should be provided so you can verify dates of employments and the employee's reasons for leaving. Without permission from the applicant, these sources are cautious about providing more information because of legal considerations.

With an applicant's written consent, consider asking about attendance and whether the person would be eligible for rehire. Other lines of inquiry include: quality and quantity of work; cooperation, initiative and attitude; the amount of supervision required; and whether the applicant presented a neat appearance.

Testing Tools

Transit systems that utilize specialized testing instruments report that these tools help identify candidates who are less likely to be absent and have accidents. Some of the tests that have proved helpful include the Bus Operator Selection Survey (BOSS), the Seattle Metro Video Test, the Drive Risk Index Video, START, and the Reid Report tests. These are explained in greater detail in the Transportation Cooperative Research Program Synthesis Report #33. (The report notes that cost of these tools was an

issue, especially for small and mid-sized transit systems, and that some transit managers felt the instruments are not suitable for a diverse pool of candidates.)

Job Previewing

Provide prospective candidates with a glimpse of what the job entails and the environment in which they will be working. Have a candidate ride a route or observe a busy dispatcher.

Background Checks

Driving and criminal background checks should be conducted for candidates you are considering to hire. Make sure the criteria for these checks are clear. The criteria should state which offenses are relevant; what offense will disqualify an applicant; what other factors will be considered (such as the time when infractions occurred); how the information will be protected; and how the rights of the applicant will be preserved.

Remember that accusations are not convictions – people are innocent until proven guilty. Another consideration is applicability. Is a “clean” record necessary to fulfill the job requirements? Is the infraction relevant to performance of job duties? It can be illegal to deny employment if the conviction is not found relevant to job performance. Conversely, some crimes, such as child molestation, prohibit eligibility for certain jobs. Also, you may choose to make allowances for offenses committed at a young age, society factors, severity of the crimes, and evidence of rehabilitation.

If you require a criminal background check, have each applicant sign an agreement and waiver statement giving your system the authority to check background and credentials for the past three years of employment. Once collected, review the information with the applicant to ensure accuracy and to provide the person an opportunity to resolve any discrepancies in the reports.

Drug and Alcohol/ Medical Evaluation Screening

Drivers have to pass drug and alcohol screening to be hired. Other safety sensitive employees also must be screened. However, consider requiring that all prospective candidates pass a DOT physical, whether or not a commercial driver's license is required. This may disqualify prospective employees with excellent customer service skills. But it can help screen out individuals whose, vision, hearing, and reflexes may be inadequate for providing safe passenger transportation.

ADA Considerations

Procedures should be established for anyone needing reasonable accommodations under the American for Disabilities Act (ADA) for any part of the application process. The ADA is not an affirmative action law. It requires that an individual with a disability have an equal opportunity to obtain a job for which he or she is qualified.

Many applicants do not require any accommodations. However, when one is needed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) suggests a problem solving approach to determine what accommodations are reasonable.

- Begin with an analysis of the job to determine the essential functions
- Determine, with the applicant's input, how the disability affects the essential function
- Identify ways to overcome the limitations
- Determine the feasibility of the proposed accommodation, with the applicant's preference
- Select the appropriate accommodation

Consult with an ADA official if you are unsure about the meaning of reasonable accommodations. Additional information on workplace accommodations is also at the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy web site (www.dol.gov/odep)

and at www.disabilityinfo.gov.

Conducting an Effective Interview

How does a manager use the interview process to find the best people? Human resource specialists recommend using both structured questions and behavioral interviewing. Structured questions help identify the applicant's skills and experience and serve as a standard frame of reference for comparing all applicants. Behavioral interviewing, is more subjective, but has the greater potential to target the traits that you are looking for in community transit personnel:

- Caring – Is the person motivated by helping people and providing a good service?
- Sensitivity – How will the candidate relate to the different types of clients and their special needs and circumstances?
- Cooperation – Is the candidate a team player? Are customer needs and wishes above personal needs?
- Initiative – Will the candidate work effectively without close supervision? Is he or she a self-starter who acts to influence events, rather than merely reacting to events or situations?
- Honesty – Will the candidate always do the right thing in unsupervised situations?
- Flexibility – Can the candidate adapt to changing circumstances and routines?
- Discretion – Will the candidate tactfully handle sensitive information and situations?

Typical behavior-focused questions take the form, "Think about a time when [something happened or you had to do some type of task]. Tell us what you did." Or, you might ask about handling conflict by saying, "Describe a time when you disagreed with your boss. How did you handle it? How did your boss react?"

Here are some other tips to guide you through

the process:

- Use the funnel technique. Start with general warm up questions. Get more specific, honing in on special skills, and past job experiences. Then move to behavior questions.
- Explore what the applicant is looking for in a job. If money is the biggest consideration and not a sense of service, he or she is probably not the best candidate for the job.
- Invite employees who will be supervising or working with the new hire to participate in process.
- Do more listening than talking. Too many people make the mistake of selling the candidate on the job instead of asking probing questioning.
- Ask for specific examples of what applicant's have done in the past and do not accept hypothetical answers.
- Administer a recognized aptitude test. Be sure to find out if the person can handle minimal stress and is capable of multitasking.
- Do not rush through the interview. Ask yourself: "If I don't have time to make a smart hiring decision now, will I have the time to hire this person's replacement in three months?"

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT: AN ONGOING PROCESS

Increasingly, transit executives are recognizing that training and development is an essential part of a recruitment and retention strategy. The organization gets better-skilled workers who are more versatile and flexible in their assignments, and employees get the chance to learn or improve their skills, gain new ways of looking at things and meet and network with coworkers.

Popular management speaker and author Bob Nelson notes that the ability of employees to break out of their day-to-day routines is very

energizing in itself: "When employees are given opportunities to learn and better themselves within the organization, it can energize an otherwise stagnant group of individuals."

He offers these suggestions:

- Ask your employees to make lists of opportunities for training and development, such as taking on new assignments, developing new skills or participating in teams. Permit employees to select and attend a training course of their choice.
- Encourage employees to create career development plans, detailing the skills they would like to learn and listing available opportunities. Encourage them to work towards a learning goal.
- Before employees attend a course, take the time to meet with them to discuss what you hope they will learn from it. Upon their return, meet with them to hear what they learned and how they will apply their new knowledge to the workplace.
- Have employees share what they learned with co-workers at an in-house workshop.

Driver Training

With a large number of new hires coming from non-transit backgrounds, entry-level training is a significant responsibility for community transit. In addition to the organizational orientation required for all new hires, transit operators must frequently be taught driving skills from the ground up. If a system uses volunteers, it is important that volunteers receive the same training as transit staff.

Training plans should cover essential topics in the classroom and in on-the-job programs such as:

Classroom Training

- Knowledge of, and adherence to, policy and procedures, including drugs and alcohol
- Safe driving practices
- Radio communications
- Schedule adherence
- Handling of fares
- Pre-trip inspections
- Map reading
- Disability and sensitivity awareness
- Passenger assistance
- Emergency procedures
- Customer service and support
- Medical basics – first aid, CPR, blood borne pathogens
- ADA transportation issues
- Organizational knowledge
- Stress management
- Records and logs required

Field Training

- Vehicle orientation, including special equipment, securements, emergency equipment
- Mobility device boarding and securement equipment
- Radio communications
- Pre-trip inspection
- Defensive driving
- Handling accidents
- Handling incidents
- Passenger assistance
- Customer service
- Routes, fares, paperwork

How are these competencies measured? Traditional measurement tools such as observational checklists, paper and pencil tests and peer assessment are still the norm. However, Transit Cooperative Research Program studies show that transit systems are beginning to make greater use of computer-based training, simulators and computer tests.

San Diego Transit has developed and implemented three interactive CD-ROM driver-

training programs: “Have a Nice Day,” “Smart Driving” and “The Professional.” Each program contains interactive modules that end with required comprehensive test questions. When the questions are answered incorrectly, the program repeats the module until the student achieves 100 percent comprehension and can go onto the next module.

The “Professional” covers a number of topics, including pre-trip inspections, customer service and driver health and well being. The Bi-State Development Agency in St. Louis reports using this software to instruct new drivers for its Metro bus operations. It also has addressed a criticism that computer training is impersonal by having an instructor monitor the progress of trainees and do follow up to determine the level of knowledge gained from the training.

The “Professional” and its companion CD-ROMs are available for purchase from the National Transit Institute, www.ntionline.com.

The New Jersey Transit system and agencies in Cleveland, Orange County, California and Atlanta have used simulator technology to enhance training. The Vehicle Maneuvering Trainer is installed in two rooms with a driver console in one room and a 1/16th- scale model of the driving course in another room. The driver can move along street while practicing turning, using mirrors, backing up and maintain lanes. Drivers are able to repeat specific maneuvers until they have achieved the skill.

Ongoing Professional Development

To meet the challenges of growth, technology, and other challenges and changes, community transit systems must depend more and more on the collective brainpower and skill sets of all employees – starting with executive leadership on down. While it may be tempting to cut training activities in some circumstances, training and development is essential to serving the needs of your customers and your communities.

Community transit trainers recommend that individuals be trained and certified in these core areas:

- Organizational skills – making internal programs and processes more effective and efficient
- Technical skills – focusing on proficiency and safety
- Community skills – focusing on marketing, public relations, and advocacy
- Crises and security management skills – learning to prepare for and handle emergencies
- Teamwork skills – learning to work efficiently as a team

CTAA, the RTAP program and National Transit Institute are excellent sources for training and development materials for all levels of employees and all sizes and shapes of community transit systems. CTAA offers professional certification program for Community Transit Manager, Community Transit Supervisor, Passenger Service and Safety, Professional Dispatching and Scheduling, Maintenance Management and Inspection and Transit Program Administration. Information on these training programs is available at www.ctaa.org/training.

Some transit agencies also have partnered with welfare to work programs and the Job Corp to enroll participants in mechanics' apprenticeship programs. Other transit systems have started their own "corporate colleges" by collaborating with community colleges and university college-transfer courses.

EVALUATION AND REWARDS: PROMOTING QUALITY

Another key factor in the development and retention of quality employees is the commitment of transit leadership to a uniform evaluation process and system for rewarding and recognizing employees. Some managers think about retention after a good employee resigns. However, if you have worked hard to hire a good employee, then you must continue the work to retain him or her.

Evaluating Employees

Transit systems should conduct formal evaluations of every employee at least once a year. The employee meets individually with his or her supervisor. The supervisor should prepare a written evaluation, which the employee then signs. The employee should also be encouraged to add written comments. This keeps the appraisal from being one sided and helps management understand how employees perceive their abilities. Informal evaluations are advised after 90 days for a new hire. Quarterly evaluations may be necessary for employees who have been informed of shortcomings in their performance or behavior.

Employee evaluations serve a number of important purposes for both employees and supervisors. Lawyer Jonathan Segal outlines some of them in an article written for the Society of Human Resource Management

Communicating strategic vision

An annual evaluation is an opportunity to review with an employee the mission, value and goals of the organization. For example, a system that values customer service can reflect this by evaluating employees on their sensitivity and responsive to passenger needs.

Recognizing valued performers

Even organizations with the best of intentions do not always recognize employees when they go that extra mile. The performance appraisal

lets top performers know of their value to the organization.

Ensuring consistency

Though most transit organizations report having an evaluation processes, many cannot produce written policies and procedures against which performance is measured. Discrimination complaints often allege that employees with similar performance levels were given unequal rewards or disciplinary action. A uniform appraisal instrument that lists performance criterion increases the potential for consistent evaluations.

Distinguishing among employees

Performance appraisals that are consistently applied throughout the transit system can help managers and team leaders pinpoint both the strengths and weakness of employees. Programs can then be designed to correct the latter.

Communicating deficiencies

Waiting too long to address a deficiency in a worker's behavior or performance is a common mistake made by managers and supervisors. Supervisors never enjoy giving an employee a poor report, but it is unfair to the worker and to other employees to ignore substandard performance. Morale also suffers when it seems that some employees get off easy. It's just as damaging, however, to give an employee a glowing report – and then to discipline him or her for a single infraction.

Salary, Benefits, and Rewards

To attract and retain quality employees, community transit needs to offer a competitive pay scale and benefits package. While that may seem a tall order, you should factor in the cost of recruiting and training employees who frequently turn over because of what they feel

are insufficient pay and benefits. Some transit systems have found that higher wages can even produce safer and more attentive drivers.

Tight budgets also make pay raises difficult to give. The best way to decide who should receive a raise is to have a written organizational policy for salary increases – and to follow it. Raises should never be given for character qualities. Always base raises or merit increases on work performance.

National surveys show that employees rank health benefits as the number one benefit and want more control and choice of plans. An Arthur Andersen study of health and welfare benefits showed that employers are providing more medical coverage to part-time employees and enhancing their fringe benefits for long-term care and child-care services, including child-care reimbursements.

However, because community transit managers will always have constraints on salaries and benefits, they must focus on other ways to reward and recognize their employees. This requires planning, resources, and possible organizational change; but recognition and incentive programs are well worth implementing because the pay off can be greater retention and better relationships between employees and managers.

The following are some strategies for improving employee retention and job satisfaction. Keep in mind that what might work for one system,

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might not work as well for another. Listen to your organization's grapevine and be ready to suggest changes and alternatives when they are needed.

- Performance incentives. Transit systems have successfully used quarterly or annual cash bonuses to reward employees for perfect attendance or safety records. Virginia Regional Transit offers a year-end bonus program tied to accumulation of points and length of time with the organization. Everyone starts with 65 points. The points are added for a number of factors including perfect attendance, safety record or completion of a training course. Conversely, points are subtracted for a moving violation, a speeding ticket and other infractions. The points are then converted to a percentage of salary. In some cases, incentives will need to be coordinated with the collective bargaining unit.
- Greater Flexibility in the Use of Time Off. Systems allow their drivers to trade days off with other operators who have similar work shifts and a number of systems allow their employees to take annual leave in daily rather than weekly increments. However, some limit the daily increments to one week in order to cut down on three-day weekends, especially during summer months. Many transit systems offer their employees personal days off.
- Focus on Wellness. Transit systems have responded to employee interest in health and fitness by creating in-house workout rooms, providing after hours exercise classes and offering courses on such topics as weight reduction, smoking cessation, nutritional education, and stress management. Some focus on a particular health concern by conducting

a heart or cancer awareness day or by providing flu shots.

- Improved Communications. Some systems have programs for new hires in which their experienced counterparts guide, tour, and advise them during the first weeks on job. This helps make adjustment as natural as possible. One transit system assigns all its operations supervisors a certain number of drivers and requires that they hold a discussion with them at least once a quarter to learn about what is on their minds.
- Employee Recognitions. These can take many forms – thank you notes, pins, plaques, award ceremonies, photo in the newsletter. Be sure to make the recognition public. Safety awards, “Bus Roadeos,” and picnics are some other ways you can send the message to employees that their quality service is needed and appreciated.

One last suggestion is to encourage some fun and spontaneity in the workplace. One of the best ways to handle stress is humor and laughter, as long as it is done appropriately. Ride a route or have coffee with your mechanics. Enjoy your job and give others a chance to enjoy their jobs, too, so they will look forward to coming to work.

CONCLUSION

As community transportation becomes more customer driven, it is critical that management implements business-focused strategies for recruiting and retaining quality workers. Key to this process is a selection process that measures prospective candidates against established job criteria and the system's core values and the provision of adequate pay and benefits. Training and professional job evaluations also play important roles in both the success of employees on the job and their desire to remain with the transit system. Last, but not least, managers

must recognize that enhanced communications, incentives, and recognition are essential to maintaining a quality workforce.

Resources

The National Transit Resource Center maintains a peer-to-peer technical assistance network, tapping into a wealth of experience from professionals in the community transportation field. For more information, visit the CTAA Web site at www.ctaa.org/ntrc/services, or contact the National Transit Resource Center at 800.527.8279.

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Hiring Great Drivers – A Driver Recruitment and

Hiring Process, developed by the Daecher Consulting Group, Inc. for PennTRAINS's PennSCORE program.

For more information on many of the issues presented in this technical assistance brief, consult the "Role and Responsibilities of Transit Managers" video and workbook training package available through RTAP.

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