

EVALUATING BUS OPERATOR PERFORMANCE

Measurement of bus operator performance begins with the evaluation of skills and effectiveness during and following the training period. As previously described, competencies measured during the training period are primarily evaluated through the use of paper and pencil tests, and observation with a checklist. Agency evaluation processes of in-service performance is a formal step often designed to ensure that job performance is adequate to meet organization goals and serve the public.

FORMAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Formal performance evaluations are those that are structured, scheduled, expected, and defined. The primary objective of performance evaluation is to determine whether operators are performing their jobs safely, serving the customer adequately, and following work rules, policies, and procedures that ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Following new hire training, competencies are measured to determine an individual's current skills, ability, and knowledge and are used to predict the operator's future performance on the job. Formal performance evaluations measure that performance in real time. Fifty-eight percent of surveyed agencies give bus operators a formal performance evaluation. The majority of these evaluations are administered every 12 months (80 percent) with the remainder occurring regularly at 6-month intervals or between 6 and 12 months. Performance feedback may be helpful in several ways.

- Formal data may allow the agency to assess its' overall performance. Agency data can highlight areas where the organization may need to apply additional resources, perhaps identifying training needs, maintenance problems, or organizational cultural issues.
- Operators can use developmental feedback for self-improvement, to avoid potential consequences of uncorrected poor performance, and to request support or training in performance areas that are causing personal stress.
- Organizational culture and performance can be enhanced by providing evaluators with the opportunity to share and reinforce the ways in which individual performance serves the goals of the organization. Areas of specific concern to the organization, especially safety and customer service delivery, can be reinforced. In a TRB Synthesis report on operator availability, it is suggested that, "It is difficult to motivate if one does not communicate" (18).

The Ann Arbor Transit Authority (125 operators) conducts formal performance evaluations that are computerized using a commercial software package. These evaluations set and track an individual's goals and progress towards meeting them. The end result is a hard copy document that summarizes strengths and weaknesses and includes an action plan to address the weaknesses. According to Ann Arbor Transit, because the program is computerized, these evaluations can be done in less time, enabling supervisors to track employees more often. This way small problems don't develop into larger ones and are solved more easily. Evaluations can be done weekly, monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. Current job descriptions are incorporated into the review.

Of agencies that conduct formal evaluations, 41 percent use them for discipline or termination, 32 percent for advancement, 27 percent for reward and recognition, and 17 percent for pay increase decisions. For a summary of these statistics, see Figure 7.

PAY FOR PERFORMANCE

At Montebello Bus Lines, bus operator performance evaluations are tied into the processes for pay increases and advancement by basing pay raises and progression on customer service compliant files, ride alongs, interaction with others, and performance evaluation.

Oahu Transit Services (The Bus) has implemented a negotiated workers compensation program under the provision of a new state law allowing unionized companies to include workers' compensation within the terms of the labor agreement. The new program, generically known as a "carve-out," removes workers' compensation from state administration. This program emphasizes safety in the workplace and sets up a coordinated medical care system for insured workers. Contested claims are adjudicated through a program of Alternative Dispute Resolution rather than hearings conducted by the State Disability Compensation Division. The new program includes incentives for union workers, including an improved pension program as a reward for their employee's lowered workers' compensation costs. In a recent satisfaction survey, approximately 85 percent of agency employees approved of the new program. Their new contract provides for an additional 5 cent per hour pension benefit after a year when hourly employees have less than 3 percent lost work time. The program

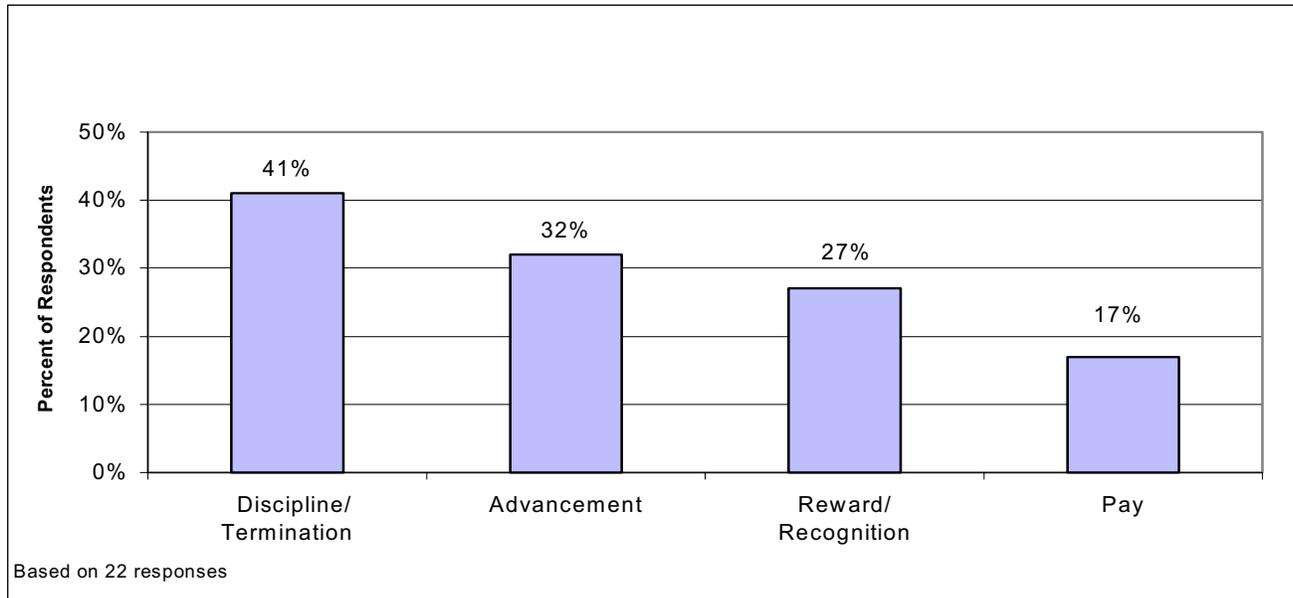


FIGURE 7 Performance evaluation uses.

has been more than funded by the reduction of worker's compensation expenses, which decreased from \$6.6 million in 1992 to \$3.2 million in 1999. The additional annual pension cost is approximately \$125,000 (19).

SATISFACTION WITH PERFORMANCE EVALUATION PROGRAMS

Surveyed agencies that conduct formal evaluations were asked to rate their satisfaction with their evaluation systems on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents the highest satisfaction level. The evaluator's satisfaction ratings averaged 3.2 on the 5-point scale. Respondents gave their evaluation systems average ratings (from 3.0 to 3.2) on similar 5-point scales when asked whether the evaluations were able to impact performance, how satisfied bus operators were with the evaluation system, and with cost-effectiveness. Larger agencies were less likely to give bus operators a formal performance evaluation, but if they did, they believed that their evaluating staff was only marginally satisfied with the system. Performance raters are trained to give performance feedback at 53 percent of surveyed agencies.

None of the agencies in this survey reported having performed any statistical reliability or validity checks of their evaluation system, although two mentioned using operator feedback to make ongoing improvements to their systems. One agency noted that they measured the effectiveness of their system by the lack of lawsuits related to its use.

One agency that is pleased with its bus operator evaluation process is the Duluth Transit Authority. Over time they

developed their own performance criteria, using their *Standard Operating Procedure Manual*, operating standards, ADA compliance requirements, customer service criteria, fare procedures, and security ride checker feedback. The Safety Ride Check program has been in place for 12 years. It records and measures a number of observations about the operator, including fares, traffic law, observation skills (watching and being aware of other vehicles, pedestrians, and passengers), customer service, vehicle operation, passenger stops, and on-time performance.

Duluth is pleased with their program for a number of reasons. First and most importantly, it is perceived as being fair. The criterion is clear to all employees so that everyone understands what is expected. In addition, the bus operator does not view the evaluation process as a negative experience. The evaluation is conducted on the bus, in the operator's office, and not in the supervisor's office. The evaluation is perceived as an opportunity to improve skills and service, not as a punishment. Time is spent on questions and/or support on real-life situations, and the exchange with the supervisor is viewed as a development opportunity. All employees understand that Safety Ride Checks are used for improvements both individually and system wide. A copy of the Safety Ride Check is included in Appendix F.

One transit authority reported that, "Bus Operators have been concerned that their evaluations are not equitable in that the operations and safety checks are done randomly and therefore, statistics vary from Operator to Operator which results in different ratings. Some Operators will get checked more often than others which affects the points/grades." For example, one operator may get checked

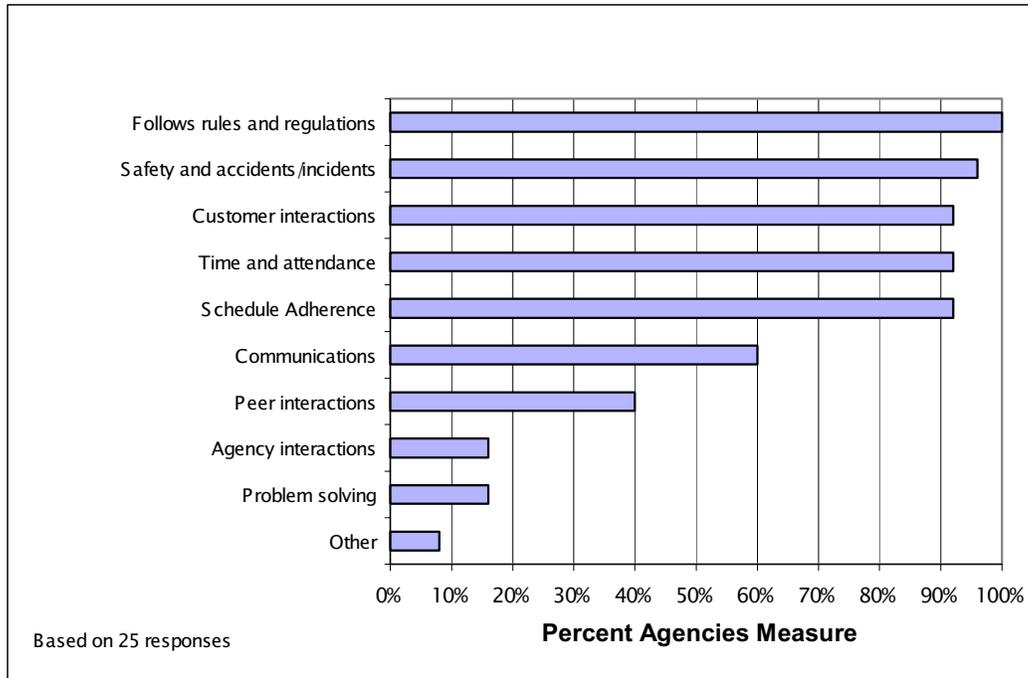


FIGURE 8 Behaviors used to assess operator performance.

once a month on an easy route, whereas another operator may get checked three times on hard routes. Differences in weather, time of day, nature and number of passengers, and type of equipment are all variables that can effect the scoring on a safety check.

Performance evaluation programs have come under fire by some researchers, who suggest that performance appraisal and pay for performance may be more harmful than helpful for organizations. W. Edwards Deming, the father of total quality management (TQM), goes so far as to state that the system by which merit is appraised and rewarded is “the most powerful inhibitor to quality and productivity in the world” (20). “[Pay for performance] nourishes short-term performance, annihilates long-term planning, builds fear, demolishes teamwork, nourishes rivalry and . . . leaves people bitter” (21).

INFORMAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Forty-two percent of responding agencies conduct informal performance evaluations. These processes are often ad hoc, unscheduled, and unexpected. Informal evaluations are primarily a matter of gathering data on many facets of individual performance. Statistics on attendance, punctuality, on-time performance, customer commendations and complaints, safe driving practices, and adherence to policy are routinely gathered for individuals in almost all agencies. For a summary of which operator behaviors are measured to assess performance, see Figure 8. In this figure, there were two “other” comments: (1) uniform appearance/equipment

inspection, operation of bus and (2) ADA procedure compliance. In looking at Figure 8, it is interesting to note the across-the-board attention to “rule following.” This focus on rule following may stem from efforts to provide consistency in service across a geographically dispersed labor group that operates with little direct supervision. This may also be because the work force operates under highly defined labor contracts and accompanying progressive discipline policies. It appears that it is often exception management (when a rule is violated) that provides the route for an interaction to occur between an operator and administrative or management staff. Customer complaints or observation by supervisors in the system are the most common vehicle for bringing performance issues to the attention of management.

Several agencies are using supervisory teams as another way to share performance feedback with operators. In this team setting, each supervisor is responsible for and has a set number of contacts per month with their team of operators. Individual supervisors determine the types of information, and the structure and settings for these contacts. These meetings serve to develop relationships in which performance data can be shared and responded to, and provide the opportunity for operators to ask questions and keep in touch with the organization. Supervisors interact with operators who have experienced recent changes in behavior to see if the supervisor can help the employee before the behavior becomes a problem.

In an attempt to get an indication of the balance between what is measured and what is important, survey respondents

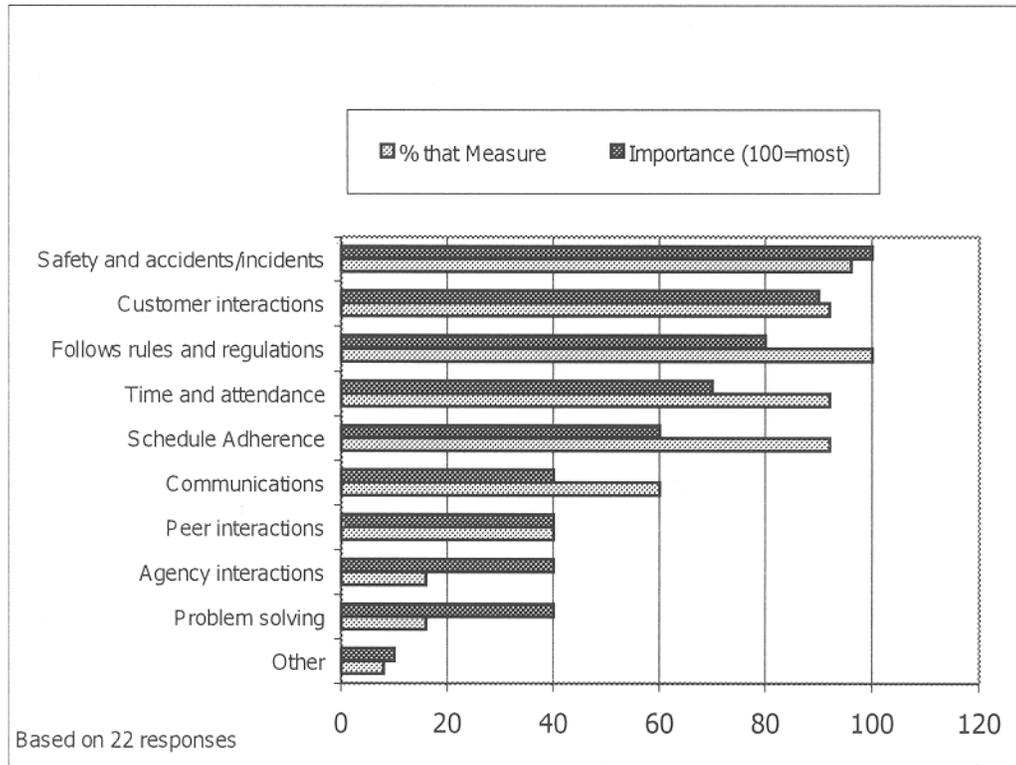


FIGURE 9 Behaviors used to evaluate operator performance and their perceived level of performance.

were asked to indicate what they measure and what types of bus operator behaviors they believed were most important. A comparison of those two scales is presented in Figure 9. Given this comparison, the two most important performance criteria, safety/accidents/incidents and customer interactions, appear to receive about as much attention as they should. Specifically, the bar lengths that measure the percentage of perceived importance for safety/accidents/incidents and for customer interactions are fairly similar. It was also observed

that a number of criteria rated as having less relative importance to the agency were found to be measured by a high proportion of survey respondents. From this comparison, it would seem that rule following, time and attendance, schedule adherence, and communications are receiving a disproportionate amount of effort in comparison to their perceived value in evaluating bus operator performance. This may be because of the ease of measurement and the tradition driving these measurements more than their actual, current level of importance.