



U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Transit Administration



Advancing Frontline Workforce Development Meeting: Synthesis

Background

The public transportation industry faces a significant skills shortage among the frontline workforce, driven by changing demographics, retirement of experienced workers, pervasive technological advances, increased demand for service, and competition from other industries. Transit has one of the oldest workforces in the transportation industry and the overall U.S. economy. In 2018, 41% of workers in bus services and urban transit were age 55 or older, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The 2018 median age of the bus service and urban transit workforce is 50.8, compared to 44.7 of the transportation and warehousing industry and 42.2 of the national working population. Exits from the industry caused by retirement and turnover produce a need to hire and train a large number of transit workers in the next 10 years. Of the current transit workforce of 400,000, more than 90% are frontline operations, maintenance, and construction workers. Transit also faces competition from other industries for talent but continues to struggle with a poor image. Many think that being a transit mechanic means turning wrenches, when, in reality, troubleshooting using a laptop connected to a vehicle and deciphering fault codes has become an essential part of the job; mechanics must continue to acquire new skills associated with the automation or computerization of other tasks. These factors present both serious challenges and exciting opportunities for workforce development.

Objective

The purpose of the Advancing Frontline Workforce Development meeting of industry experts was to identify training needs for the frontline public transportation workforce in the U.S. and ways to connect apprenticeship and formal training programs to support these needs.

Findings & Conclusions

Numerous immediate, short-term, and long-term training needs for frontline public transportation workers in the U.S. were identified in a meeting of transit industry representatives.

Due to impending retirements and frequent turnover, there is a need to hire and train 500,000 transit workers in the next 10 years, and more than 90% will be frontline workers. Given that transit spends less than 0.88% of payroll on training compared to 2% for an average U.S. company, the task of providing needed training is overwhelming and will not be met unless immediate action is taken.

To address unmet needs, changing demands, and obstacles in transit frontline workforce recruitment, development, and retention, the Transportation Learning Center and the National Transit Institute convened industry representatives from labor and management. Selected findings and recommendations from the meeting include the following:

- Transit agencies need assistance with their recruitment efforts. Communicating benefits and advantages of a transit career is essential, as are recruiting to a younger audience, aligning with schools as sources for pre-apprenticeship activities, partnering with mentorship organizations and attending youth summits, highlighting advancement and management opportunities, and making the recruitment process more efficient.
- Instead of building needed skills through training, agencies and industry officials place greater emphasis on procuring advanced equipment such as battery-electric buses. As training continues to fall behind and skills deteriorate, agencies face a real possibility that they will not have the required number of vehicles available to meet daily service requirements. Agencies should give frontline worker training the attention it needs and collectively work to fill the training deficit. To do this, agencies should make use of retired instructors as traveling educators that can deliver training to agencies as needed, expand the role of OEM training to provide foundational instruction on core competencies, and work with community colleges and vocational schools, assisting them to establish transit-specific training programs.
- To retain workers, agencies should make workers aware of promotional opportunities, provide mentorship and apprenticeship, provide health and safety training, and create a positive work culture. Agencies would benefit from a comprehensive “best practices” manual that documents successful approaches used by transit agencies nationally to retain its frontline workforce. As with recruitment and development of training, these activities are challenging for the vast majority of agencies to become proficient on their own.

Benefits

Because their primary focus is to provide safe and reliable transportation services at a time of budgetary constraints, many agencies do not have the necessary resources to devote to workforce issues, especially when it comes to more effectively retaining its current workers. Assistance that comes to them in the form of collective practices known to provide beneficial results would help maximize their efforts to maintain workers who are successfully recruited and trained.

Project Information

FTA Report 0154

This research project was conducted by the National Transit Institute. For more information, contact FTA Project Manager Lisa Colbert at (202) 366-9261, Lisa.Colbert@dot.gov. All research reports can be found at <https://www.transit.dot.gov/about/research-innovation>.