

What We Think We Learned

Transit Workforce Interview Themes (March 2020)

How to read this document:

Below is a synopsis of the transit industry and workforce development interviews conducted from December 2019-February 2020. Several common themes were captured however the research team has chosen three distinct areas where the need for improvement should be elevated: Pipeline Development, Pathways, and Processes. While there are several ongoing successes within the transit industry, this document strives to focus on key identified gaps most conducive for joint problem-solving.

By sharing this document we are documenting which themes are of most interest to the transit agencies and building an invested consensus on areas of collaboration. We, the research team, still feel we are missing the whole picture and will continue to map out the transit training programs in Greater Philadelphia. We hope you will continue to assist in identifying what we still do not know.

Improvement Areas

Pipeline Development

“They [the transit industry] needs a clear pathway and training strategy starting from entry level and moving them through the ranks.”

1. Missing Foundations

There was a lot said about pipelines and, most notably, the *lack* of career pipelines within the transit industry. In addition to lacking a clear pipeline from recruitment to entry level hire, once hired, the career ladder or pathway is not clear. Clarifying the pathway through visual materials was suggested often.

2. Transit Career Awareness

Information is not passed down to the community level about jobs in the transit industry. People are not aware of the job opportunities in the transit industry or the growth opportunities in those jobs.

A common theme was the need for early exposure and education about the transit industry and the types of jobs there are to students starting in middle school all the way through college. It needs to be communicated to students and their parents that transit is a career option with family sustaining pay. Skilled trades need to be elevated as a good career path equally valid to college path. For a pipeline program to be successful transit needs to start early and think about what kind of information is going out and when.

3. External and Internal Training

There is a need for training programs that include high school, vocational, community college and 4-year degree seekers. Most community colleges have programs that can be adjusted to prepare workers for the transit industry, and they are well positioned to partner on training industry specific skills. As equipment becomes increasingly more sophisticated, with more technical and digital skills required over mechanical skills, this is becoming more paramount.

In addition to hard skills, staff training and investment is needed to maintain a flexible and adaptable workforce that will support a worker friendly environment/company culture. Greater flexibility is needed to stay competitive and remain attractive to workers.

4. Apprenticeships

There are not enough skilled workers and the transit industry needs to grow their own. Transit has unique needs that requires on-the-job learning. Apprenticeships are an important part of having enough skilled workers and there are not enough of them. Employers and workers alike are interested in more apprenticeships. Training should include hard, as well as soft skills such as emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills.

5. Partnership Opportunities

To move the needle in a substantial way the transit industry should be looking towards industry partnerships and government funding. SEPTA partners locally with Philadelphia Works, but there are other federal and state resources. Connecting directly with funding sources, training providers, and CBOs will allow them to build cost effective apprenticeship and training programs.

There are many opportunities for the transit industry to partner on training both within the industry, and with community colleges, 4-year colleges, vocational schools, community based organizations, and workforce development professionals. There is a rich ecosystem in the region to support collaborative training programs.

Employee Pathways

"I don't know. Whatever pathways exist, they are incomplete."

1. Current Pathways

All of these programs are “pre-employment” where trainees are given preferential hiring but not guaranteed a job.

There are very few pathways into the transit industry. Here is what SEPTA has done recently:

1. Partnered with Philadelphia Works for bus operator training
2. Partnered with West Philadelphia Skills Initiative for bus operator training.
3. Partnered with the Collegiate Consortium to design the Transit Onramp Program for mechatronics/electrical mechanics.
4. EDSI (Educational Data Systems, Inc.) has been part of the Transit Onramp Program initiative providing a basic work-ready bootcamp. They are currently holding regular information sessions for SEPTA on bus operator positions at various CareerLinks.
5. Internally, transit agencies train Dispatchers and Rail Operators.

We uncovered past programs for conductor training at the Community College of Philadelphia and the Keystone Transit Career Ladder Partnership.

NOTE: If you are aware of additional transit training programs in the region please share them with us!

Internal Processes

"Transit agencies rely on inherited legacy hiring practices and tend to be bureaucratic. For hard to fill positions, the focus is on hiring rather than retention."

"The industry is a beast to turn around. Whether it's legacy hiring, internal practices or an aging workforce it is very difficult to make change"

1. Human Resource Processes

Respondents highlighted three major areas ripe for improvement in the hiring process:

- **Job Descriptions:** There is a need to simplify and update them to include only necessary skills and eliminate unnecessary barriers. Some requirements are too high and reflect a 2008 job market rather than today's job market. Items for review include drug testing (if not for safety reasons get rid of it), number of years' experience, college degrees vs associates, etc.
- **Assessment Test:** The assessment test is seen as being problematic, especially from the WFD perspective. The assessment kicks about half of all applicants out. If an applicant fails, they are removed from the process completely and cannot apply again for two years. There are different assessments depending on the positions. The general response from all interviewees is that the transit industry is not sure about the efficacy of the assessment or even what it is measuring.
- **Hiring Timeline:** Hiring timelines vary widely across positions and agencies but are generally thought to be too long. Time from hire to start can range from 60 days to 6 months depending on the position. On average it is a two-month gap.

2. Retention Practices

Retention tactics vary across organizations and positions. Typically, if they are going to lose an employee it happens early on. If an employee stays for two years, they stay around long-term. The transit industry is a life-long career. There is a retirement package specific to rail workers that takes 5 years to become vested in. It incentivizes people to stay.

With that said, the quasi-government structure and lingering effects of salary freezes makes it difficult to pay competitive wages. Transit gets outbid for skilled positions by engineering firms, IT companies, and private transit agencies. The industry is not able to pay competitive salaries compared with the private sector for electricians, electronic techs, and IT but does provide stability.

Retaining quality talent will require greater flexibility to respond to changes in technology, employee needs, and workforce availability. Internal policies that move towards more predictable scheduling, competitive salaries, clear career pathways for continued growth, and valuing workers are part of the solutions that respondents shared.

3. Realistic Job Expectations

Countless times respondents stressed the importance of preparing workers and employers on what to expect. When employees know what to expect, they will be more likely to stick around. When workers are properly prepared for the good, the bad, and the ugly of a job, as well as the reward if they stay, they are more satisfied with the work. In the transit industry employees need to know about the irregular schedules and difficult hours for the first year or two. They need to know that these are large organizations with bureaucracies, and they will experience culture shock.

4. Change Management

The perception of transit agencies is that they are bureaucratic, it is difficult to make change, and often rely on legacy processes that are not efficient. Leadership has launched change initiatives, but this alone is not enough. To institutionalize the changes will require staff training, aligning incentives, and encouraging new behaviors.

The challenges faced by the transit industry are not necessarily unique. The industry is experiencing changes similar to other skilled labor industries with new technologies – e.g. moving from fuel to electric or new repair/diagnostic tools. The biggest changes will come in the future with increased automation but this is hard to think about when dealing with the immediate pressures of today's technologies.

RCEDF: Addressing Turnover in the Transit Industry

Highlights

On Thursday, May 30, DVRPC hosted a design-thinking workshop in partnership with the Fox School of Business at Temple University. Due to a demographic shift, demand for increasingly sophisticated skills, gaps in training, and industry perceptions, the transit industry needs to address these workforce and human capital issues that are critical to the continuing success of the industry. This workshop highlighted various workforce trends to try and pinpoint the contributing factors.

The morning was kicked off with a panel discussion. The panel was led by Ms. Jackie Linton, SPHR, SHRM-SCP, MBA Advisor, Fox School of Business at Temple University. Participants included Mr. Dan Ampascher, Director of Strategic Initiatives, SEPTA; Ms. Jeanne M. Victor, Chief of Human Resources & EEP/AA, New Jersey Transit (NJT); and Ms. Mohona Siddique, Project Manager, The Economy League of Greater Philadelphia (EL).

Panel Discussion

Q: What is your biggest pain point in staffing? What are you doing to combat the issue?

NJT: Lack of funding has led to a hiring time gap, lower salaries, and title gaps. The low unemployment rate and highly specialized job titles are also issues. We are looking at our compensation structure to try and match market rate wages, as well as ways to streamline the entire hiring process. The current onboarding time frame of approximately 240 days is too long.

SEPTA: The fact that SEPTA is a 24/7 organization and reliable staff is needed, people need to show up and show up early. Also, that seniority is an issue in union jobs. Finding people willing to take the least desirable shifts for 1-3 years has been difficulty; financial incentives don't always work to alleviate the challenge. We have been trying to make clear the realities of the job to potential applicants so they can make an informed choice to work at SEPTA. Outreach includes bringing people out to sites and having senior staff talk to recruits.

Q: Why do people move on?

EL: There is a lack of softer skills. There are also wrap around situations that prevent people from finding and keeping work, including the impact that unpredictable scheduling has on the ability to obtain childcare. Urbanization trend that will be a challenge to transit include the movement of poverty to the suburbs.

Q: How do you find people?

NJT: Traditionally, positions were posted and there was a wait for resumes to flow in. Now NJT is recruiting proactively. There are limitations on recruitment for the locomotive training program: the course is 20 months long, there is a hard class size limit, and there is a limited number of available instructors. The program has had a historical dropout rate of approximately 50%.

SEPTA: Railroad is unique and federal rules are strict regarding certifications and requirements. If you fail twice during training, you may lose your job, and also the level of responsibility for operators is so high. It can be difficult to find recruits with the right personality, skill set, and ability to learn.

EL: Workforce development is an equity issue. The Economy League's North Philadelphia Initiative has found a perfect storm of challenges in the area.

- 1 in 4 people don't have a diploma
- Low workforce participation rate
- 27,000 people in North Philadelphia are returning citizens
- 1 in 5 have a disability

While these issues are not unique to North Philly, people are at the risk of being left behind. Employers need to be aware of this and look for ways that they might be excluding potential applicants.

Q: How do we improve the workforce environment?

SEPTA: Apprenticeships and Internships in transit and the trades. Career/technical education (CTE) numbers are down and we need to build these programs back up.

Q: Is college grad recruitment different than non-college?

NJT: NJT is really three companies in one: corporate, bus and rail. For corporate jobs we post jobs and sometimes do an executive search. On the trades side, we have partnerships with technical education providers. Most of the union jobs at NJT do not require a degree.

Q: Are they looking for the different things?

SEPTA: New employees for both professional and union jobs are looking for competitive pay, mobility, and control over their working environment. Union jobs are more structured with regard to pay bumps and a simpler, clearer path for advancement. There is a new program for trainees, going over what the environment is and what they are getting into.

Q: Are there better ways to provide support?

EL: Where are the trend in hiring and certifications? The transportation industry has specific barriers (ex. Driver's License). Is there a potential to shift from a certification-based system to a skills-based one. Look for parallel skill sets - those in the retail and hospitality industries have the soft and tech skills, but not a lot of advancement potential.

Q: *What have you seen that works elsewhere?*

NJT: Partnering with schools. Looking at processes for what do we need and why do we need it. Look at job descriptions for potential barriers and fine tuning the candidate experience.

SEPTA: We need to develop partnerships with workforce organizations around the region that work with certain populations. There needs to be more extensive outreach to due to low unemployment and go after non-traditional employees (ex. Tradeswomen of SEPTA recruiting event, Project HOME, Back on My Feet).

EL: Employer engagement is important for making connections with existing programs. Combining priority populations w/cross-sector collaboration (mixing industries).

Q: *With respect to automation, how can you convince workers to join a rapidly changing industry?*

NJT: The industry is changing, but not that quickly. We aren't there yet on AVs. The infrastructure is already in place and large organizations tend to change slowly. We can still offer careers in the industry and can get people to grow with NJT.

EL: There is a parallel between AI and human component opportunities. People will be needed to operate and maintain these systems and provide customer service. These jobs will probably require a higher educational level.

SEPTA: Public acceptance of autonomous delivery vehicles is going to come faster than autonomous passenger vehicles. SEPTA is really a customer service entity in the transit industry and there will always be a human element to the process.

Audience Q & A

Q: *Hiring new people is important, but what are your thoughts on retention, especially with respect to younger people?*

NJT: Generational attitudes are different and we need to offer people more than we have in the past. We need to keep people interested and motivated. On the corporate side the new generation is looking to do more and we need to give them a career path in order to stay.

SETPA: The newest employees coming in want to be part of the dialog and want to work. Boomers need to start letting them be part of the discussion and provide more access to leadership.

Q: Have you done any type of analysis on the 45,000 people who have applied for jobs?

SEPTA: Some are applying to everything that is open thinking they can get a foot in the door and there is a need to make sure that the qualifications match (ex. application for CIO without a degree). There is less room for movement on union jobs since the qualifications are part of their agreement. A number of people in our region don't have the basic qualifications like diplomas and we are working with organizations on getting people GEDs. There are now a higher number of open jobs than there was eight or nine years ago. SEPTA is limited by a headcount and cannot recruit until the position opens up. The organization also does a lot of internal hiring.

After a short break, participants were then broken in six different tables to discuss three key questions: Q1: how might we address the work/life balance issues that can arise from being a new transit employee and working a challenging schedule? Q2: how might we address the challenges that arise from an extended training schedule, including lower pay and the threat of instability? Q3: how might we attract non-traditional candidates who may possess the right skill sets though they don't have traditional certifications or education seemingly required for the role? Each group had an hour to think about possible solutions and objectives. Based on feedback, this workshop series will continue in FY 2020.

The meeting adjourned for lunch at 12:15 pm.

May 30, 2019 Workforce Workshop Outcomes

Design-Thinking Exercise

Q1: *how might we* address the work/life balance issues that can arise from being a new transit employee and working a challenging schedule?

Q2: *how might we* address the challenges that arise from an extended training schedule, including lower pay and the threat of instability?

Q3: *how might we* attract non-traditional candidates who may possess the right skill sets though they don't have traditional certifications or education seemingly required for the role?

Table 1:

"First-Bursts"

Q1	Q2
Telecommuting	Ban the box
Flex hours	Education assistance
5 days on, 2 off	Clear pathways to promotions
More vacation and pay	Develop cohorts of people
Childcare for off shift workers	Combine training and 3 year clean driving record
Give Bonuses for making it through milestones	Mentor lower employees
Job training opportunities	Child care for trainees
Day care options	Teach High school student to drive buses

Idea Title: Child Care

- Provide round the clock childcare to employees and trainees (to help with retention and recruitment)
- Possibly recruit in cohorts to have enough participants to be sustainable.
- Possibly open it up to people outside the organization a revenue generator.
- Childcare credits during training
- Extend after school program for dayshift employees

Key Questions?

How much will this cost? How to integrate into 24-hour schedules? Where/Enough space? How to develop programs for multiple age groups?

Maybe a stipend?

Table 2

"First Bursts"

Recruitment:

New technology for applications

Develop more tech schools

Remove red tape establishing tech schools

Free driving schools for low income families	Focus on day to day
More apprenticeship programs	4 day work weeks
Target populations w/out drivers licenses	Define missing skill gaps
Apprenticeship programs	
Simulation training	
Got p new spaces to recruit	

ReBranding:

Make the knowledge of training programs ubiquitous
 Use gaming and media to fill in gap to explain the industry
 Sell the role of the position beyond the task as part of the job

Idea Title: Rebrand the Industry

- Use Hollywood and train politicians to reconsider how they promote certain careers
- Selling the role of the position beyond the job tasks “shift view”
- Highlight the positive vs. bad
- Use gaming and media to bridge the gap
- Free simulation software
- Make the job a point of pride

Key Questions?

How/who will champion these ideas? What are the focus populations?

“First-Bursts”

Table 3

Outreach and Recruitment

Service Industry Outreach
 Work on customer service skill development
 Offer free programs that allow for participants to obtain certification before GED
 Military veteran outreach
 High school pathway program
 Outreach to community colleges
 Provide full time employee pay and benefits during training period
 Loan program for trainers to borrow future wages

Scheduling

Scaled up pay for difficult shifts
 Train with apprenticeship to get value from trainees
 Unquestionable uncle day
 Rotating assignments for new employees
 Bidding program for shifts
 Mentoring programs
 Flexible schedules
 Bonus pay
 Incentives for veteran employees

Idea Title: New Employee Mental Health Day

- Designed for employees with no PTO
- 8 hour notice
- Employees can call out and take care of themselves
- Advertised as a one-time opportunity in the first 6 months of employment

Key Questions?

How would this work with unions? How to deal with multiple employees who need this on the same day? What are the associated costs? If not use, could the employee get a pay out?

“First-Bursts”

Table 4

Reaching out to Candidates

Videos online about a day in the life of a (positon)

Explain/spell out the path from entry level through apprenticeship to employment

Look for confirmation process for interview candidates

Have a touch a truck, touch a train events to learn about jobs

Have memorization competitions to attracts candidates to railroad engineer positons

Skill based assessments

Social events for potential candidates

Wrap Around Services

Increase off shift pay

Offer a point based system to get better schedules

Offer child care at job sites

Resume review training for managers

Free driver license school

Make HR a top priority

Earn and Learn

Change rule to allow overlap between retiring employees and hiring replacements

Tuition reimbursements

Hire more instructors

Host webinars and recorded lectures

Create a railroad program/course at the trade and county colleges

Idea Title: In-Person Application Sessions

- Physically help people fill out application
- Help with gateway questions
- Offer details about multiple job opportunities at once
- Talk to current employees in the role
- Learn about the day in the life
- Do On site interviews

- Soft skill session about
- Make it fun
- DO skills/personality tests or physical tests
- Make it a game
- Work with multiple agencies to share costs

Key Questions:

What are the resources for planning and implementation? Who is the right mix of people? How to market the job fair? Location? Emphasizing prerequisites? Who are the potential partners?

Table 5:
“Idea Bursts”

Idea Title: Improving Education, Recruitment and Training

Implementation Ideas:

- Military style campaign (We Want you!)
- Transit tech schools
- Formalize transit industry profession
- Curriculum design (standardize curriculum)

Considerations:

Who pays? Why are people not passing the exam?

Idea Title: National Consortium

Attraction/Recruitment	Training	Retain	Promote	Feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Campaigns • Expand recruitment to diverse places • Standardize testing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit Tech School • Apprenticeships • Standardize training • Transit Agency coordination • Innovative training methods • Create a National Transit Institute • Partner with tech schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work/Life balance • Child care • EE Engagement • Partner new recruits • Create buddy system 	Succession planning	

Table 6:
Idea Title: Increasing Transit Career Pathway Education

- Start early K-12 education
- Messaging/marketing
- Realistic expectations and consistent exposure
- WIIFM
- Parent/community education