

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 difficult; 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.