

Workforce Development and Succession Planning to Prepare the Rural Transit Industry for the Future: Executive Summary

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Abstract

As America's transportation workforce continues to age, there is an increased need to invest in workforce development to combat the impending retirement tsunami. This is especially true within the small urban and rural transit industry. A national survey of rural transit managers was conducted to determine current workforce development practices as well as succession planning procedures. Viable responses were received from 160 agencies in 40 states. The majority of transit agency managers responding to the survey have been employed by their agency for more than 15 years while 75% of total respondents were 50 years of age or older. One-third of respondents indicated they plan to retire within the next 5 years while only 15% have any viable succession plan in place to combat this high management turnover.

Introduction

The objectives of this research were to address perceived workforce development and succession planning difficulties within the rural public transit industry. A national survey of rural transit managers was conducted to determine current workforce development practices as well as succession planning procedures. This study also included a literature review providing insight regarding the current state of the existing transit industry structure along with related workforce development and succession plans. Applicable resources for rural transit agencies to consider when developing a training program were also included.

Workforce development has been a concern of the transit industry for some time. Previous reports by the American Public Transit Association (APTA) and the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) have defined the industry's workforce development challenges and developed a series of recommendations. A report issued by APTA in 2010 suggested that there is an emerging and troublesome wave of retirements and that the organization should focus more on workforce development. A recent report from the U.S.

Department of Education showed that 63 percent of U.S. transit workers are 45 years of age or older, and that significant job growth will occur during the next 10 years in both urban and rural communities.

Survey of Rural Transit Agencies

A nationwide survey of rural transit agencies was conducted to determine current workforce development practices as well as succession planning procedures. The Small Urban and Rural Transit Center (SURTC) designed online surveys to distribute to transit agency directors. Surveys contained questions regarding current workforce development practices as well as anticipated needs regarding training and succession planning.

The survey was distributed nationwide via email to agencies in small urban and rural areas. An email list containing nearly 800 valid addresses was used along with individual transit agency contacts. The email list was specific to those agencies receiving 5311 formula grant federal funding. These grants are distributed to states for the purpose of supporting areas with population of less than 50,000.

A total of 137 usable completed surveys were received from the email list yielding an almost 20%

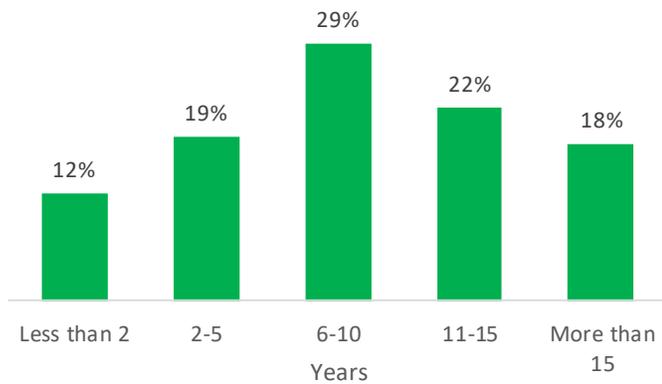


Figure 1. Years Before Planned Retirement of Transit Agency Manager

response rate. Another 23 surveys were received from other individual transit agency contacts, providing a total of 160 viable surveys from 40 different states. Two thirds of the respondents were from agencies with 30 or fewer employees (including part-time employees but not contracted workers), and 18% were from agencies with fewer than six employees.

The majority of transit agency managers responding to the survey had been employed by their agency for more than 15 years, while 75% of respondents were 50 years of age or older. One-third of respondents indicated they plan to retire within the next 5 years (Figure 1).

Training

Participants were questioned regarding their attendance at trainings (Figure 2). Less than half indicated that they had attended some type of transit-manager-specific training during the past five years.

Also, of respondents who had attended training during the last five years, 35% reported that they had only attended one or two trainings during that time frame.

A lack of funding and time were the two reasons most cited by transit managers for not taking trainings. Distance and scheduling conflicts were also mentioned by more than

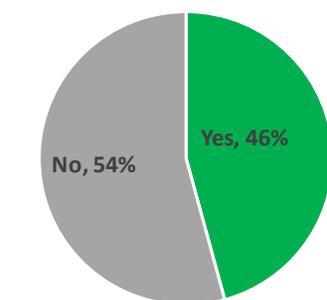


Figure 2. Survey Respondents who Attended Training During Last Five Years

a third of respondents. Among managers from smaller agencies (15 employees or fewer) distance and not enough time were the biggest reasons for not attending trainings.

The vast majority of managers surveyed believed that the trainings they have taken have been beneficial to their jobs. Managers with more than 15 years of experience found leadership, business plan development, and emergency management most beneficial, while managers with fewer than 10 years of experience found transit principles and cost/benefit analysis trainings most beneficial.

Survey participants were also questioned regarding training available for internal employees interested in promotion. A number of managers responded that trainings are often available through the Community Transportation Association of American (CTAA) as well as the American Public Transportation Association (APTA). Some mentioned that internal trainings are available in subject matter such as leadership, human resources, and business plan development.

When asked specifically about different training topics, nearly half of respondents believed that training for employees in transit principles would be helpful while about a third felt that training in cost/benefit analysis, emergency management, and human resources would be useful as well (Figure 3). Also, managers with more than 20 years of experience responded that internal employees interested in promotion should focus on transit principles, human resources, and emergency management trainings.

Employee Recognition Programs

Employee recognition programs can be a useful tool for improving employee morale and retention. Nearly 40% of the responding agencies have some form of employee recognition program. These programs are most common among the larger agencies. Most agencies with more than 20 employees have an employee recognition program, but very few of the smaller agencies offer employee rewards. Among those agencies with an employee recognition program, 80% issue certificates for outstanding work, while nearly half award plaques to honor employees. Recognition letters and meals were also cited by more than 30% of respondents as rewards for employee excellence.

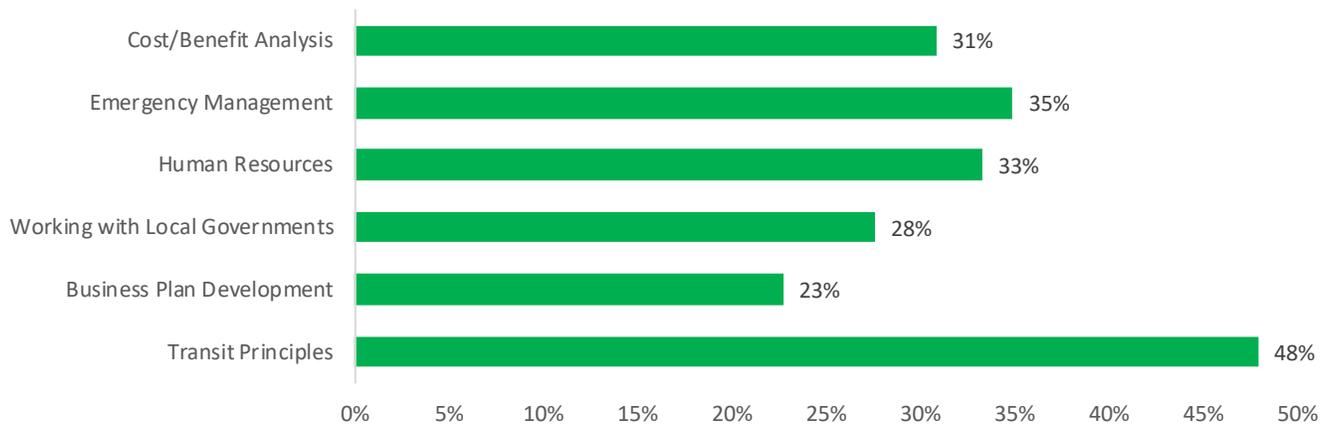


Figure 3. Beneficial Workforce Development Training for Promotion

Succession Planning

Despite the significant number of managers expected to retire over the next few years, only 15% of the responding agencies have any form of succession plan currently in place (Figure 4), and most of those with succession plans are for larger agencies with more than 20 employees. When asked to elaborate on their current succession plans, some agency managers highlighted one-on-one training to groom assistant managers for management positions. Others mentioned that they have written procedures in place that cover management responsibilities as well as staff designated to work closely to familiarize new management personnel with agency rules and processes. A few respondents also cited goal setting with monthly reporting to their boards and human resource committees. Job shadowing by assistant managers was another method used by some as part of their succession planning process.

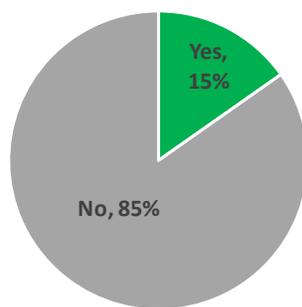


Figure 4. Agencies with Succession Plans

Potential Training Opportunities

A number of national organizations provide training for rural transit agencies. Trainings range from manager-level education to opportunities for vehicle operators and front-

line personnel. Many of these training opportunities are in-person, while some organizations also provide web-based training options. The following organizations provide training options for agencies:

- American Public Transportation Association (APTA)
- Center for Transportation e-Learning (CTeL)
- Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA)
- Easter Seals Project Action (ESPA)
- Federal Transit Administration (FTA)
- National and State Level Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)
- National Transit Institute (NTI)
- Small Urban and Rural Transit Center (SURTC)

Numerous training opportunities exist at both state and local levels as well. The full report provides links, courtesy of APTA and CTAA, that can be used to gain more information regarding local transit trainings that may be of interest to rural transit agencies. Many of these resources include state transit associations as well as state DOTs.

Summary and Conclusions

As America's transportation workforce continues to age, there is an increased need to invest in workforce development to address the impending retirement tsunami. This is especially true within the small urban and rural transit industry.

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Details of succession plans among survey respondents varied considerably. Many respondents mentioned mentoring and one-on-one training as succession plan examples while others have current staff members designated to work with incoming management to familiarize them with agency rules and processes. Also concerning was that only 40% of respondents indicated having any type of employee recognition program in place. To improve employee morale and advancement opportunities from within, transit agencies must take the time to develop feasible succession plans and make an effort to reward employees for outstanding performance.

The report showed that training opportunities exist at both national and local levels, focusing on various topics from transit principles to emergency and human resource management. The report provides an overview of these training opportunities, with links to potential training sites listed for each organization.

Focusing on potential web-based trainings may be practical for many rural transit agencies. These trainings are usually less costly and time consuming when factoring in the need for travel to traditional in-person classroom training.

All managers, along with employees seeking internal advancement, should consider trainings focusing on transit principles, leadership, business plan development, and emergency management to better equip both themselves and their agencies. Managers need to prioritize trainings that best fit their agency needs.

The successful recruitment and training of workers who will be responsible for all aspects of transit operations is both critical and timely. Steps must be taken to ensure that proper planning ensures the future viability of the industry. Increased investments in employee development now will yield a future public transportation workforce with the knowledge and ability to serve rural America for generations to come.

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