People First

How a more strategic approach to human resources can help transit agencies attract and retain the talent they need to run great service.

TransitCenter

People First

How a more strategic approach to human resources can help transit agencies attract and retain the talent they need to run great service.

Contents

1 Executive Summary

Public transit is an essential public service that benefits everyone, even if it's only used by some. Transit bolsters the economy by allowing goods, services, and ideas to be exchanged without adding additional traffic. It's a critical tool for achieving climate goals by reducing carbon emissions from car travel and fostering more compact and energy efficient land uses. And as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, millions of essential workers rely on transit to reach the jobs that keep society functioning. Not only do we need to support the transit we have today, we need to lay the foundation for better and much more transit.

But in cities and regions across the country, transit agencies are struggling to fully deliver on their mission—and in many cases have trouble just getting service out the door. The reasons for these challenges are numerous, but many of them fundamentally come down to a lack of people power. Agencies simply do not have the workforce they need to get the current job done or plan for the future. Whereas transit jobs were once highly sought after, they are now failing to attract and retain the talent needed to solve big 21st-century problems. At many agencies, the number of retirements and resignations are outpacing the number of new people they can bring in the door. To compound the problem, agencies are also anticipating another big wave of retirements within the next seven years.

The challenges facing the transit workforce are structural in nature. The pandemic exacerbated but did not cause them. Transit agencies have not fully adjusted to decades-in-the-making changes in the labor market and workers' expectations. It remains difficult to get hired at a transit agency and harder still to stay, given the bureaucracy employees are required to navigate, the burnout and stress associated with working in a 24/7 operation, and the low starting pay and limited investment in training and professional development.

To make transit agencies workplaces of the future, this report makes the case that agencies must transform Human Resources (HR) into strategic functions that can proactively address future workforce needs, prioritize professional development and succession management, and build a positive workplace culture. HR departments within agencies are often siloed and under-resourced,

Agencies simply do not have the workforce they need to get the current job done or plan for the future.

often utilized only after a crisis occurs. Instead, HR departments must be staffed, resourced, and considered strategic thought partners at the leadership level to participate in critical conversations about current and future organizational needs. Transit leadership will need to partner with human resources to develop short, medium, and long-term plans to grow individual and agency capacity.

Informed by over 20 interviews with current and former transit agency employees, this report examines the current challenges facing public sector human resources that limit hiring and retention and outlines potential solutions and the support and resources needed to rethink this critical agency function.

The report highlights four areas that need to be reimagined in order for agencies to reverse worrying workforce trends: where human resources sits within an agency, hiring practices, retention practices, and workplace culture.

The report recommends major changes to hiring policies and procedures in order to make jobs in transit more attractive to applicants, as well as to make it easier to get hired. Human resources staff will have to rewrite job descriptions in plain language that better explains their benefits. They will have to go through existing descriptions and strike unnecessary requirements and process steps. Additionally, they will have to conduct compensation studies in order to ensure the jobs they're offering are maximally competitive while maintaining pay equity with current employees.

This report also recommends that agencies invest in their workforce to increase retention and retain the knowledge that will be lost with retirements. Agencies typically have training programs for entry-level jobs like bus operators and sometimes have leadership training for executives. For existing employees, there are often fewer training opportunities. Agencies should be investing substantially in training throughout the organization at all levels. Additionally, every transit agency employee needs to be given clear information about how to advance, what skills are needed, and how they can obtain those skills.

High stress and burnout is a leading cause of transit agency departures. The nature of 24/7 transit operations can create a crisis-driven workplace culture that leaves little opportunity for rest, reflection, and growth. To become workplaces of the future, transit agencies will have to change their culture to be more

Transit agencies have not fully adjusted to decades-in-the-making changes in the labor market and workers' expectations.

equitable, supportive, and conducive to employee wellbeing. With more dedicated staff, HR departments can create roles specifically dedicated to developing a psychologically safe and balanced workplace culture.

The problems plaguing the transit workforce are deep and longstanding. But the good news is that transit is a more exciting place to work than it has ever been, with huge opportunities for public-spirited people to make an impact. There is also a great deal of passion for the mission among the people we interviewed for this report. Many of the people who have left transit can't wait to get back. And there are so many people who show up to work at transit agencies every single day and perform herculean feats to ensure that the buses will show up at our stops. We owe it to them to make their jobs easier. There is no just and sustainable future without great transit, and there is no great transit without people.

② Introduction

Whether we live in a big city, the suburbs, or a small town, most of us want our communities to be equitable and vibrant. Public transit gives us a healthy, clean, and affordable way for everyone to get around. But public transit across the US is facing a workforce crisis that is impeding its ability to provide mobility for all. In 2022, 96% of 190 transit agencies surveyed by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) reported workforce shortages, and 84% reported those shortages impacted the ability to operate transit service.[1]

The workforce shortages are impacting the people who ride transit and limiting transit's recovery from the pandemic. In June 2022, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) had to reduce frequencies on their subway lines due to a shortage of dispatchers; a year later full service still has not returned. Along with overworked dispatchers, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) found that the MBTA lacked enough employees (13.4% of positions were unfilled at the time) to safely manage its capital projects. Miami-Dade County delayed the June 2022 implementation of their Better Bus Network due to operator shortage; it is now scheduled for November 2023.[2] In June 2023 King County Metro gave riders five days of notice that they were suspending six bus routes and some trips on additional lines due to worker and vehicle shortages.[3]

The shortage of frontline transit workers is most visible to the public, but agencies are also short on administrative, capital, and planning staff. These shortages impact the daily functioning of agencies and slow down delivery of infrastructure projects that are necessary to improve safety, speed up buses and trains, and expand service. In June 2023 Denver's Regional Transportation District (RTD) had to put a major maintenance project on hold to use their resources to address emergency signal repairs elsewhere in the network.[4]

Not only does the high number of vacancies impact the quality of the service riders experience, it also impacts the workers who remain on staff. Resignations and retirements during the pandemic in addition to longstanding unfilled positions have caused many transit employees to take on additional workload. Understaffing creates a vicious cycle that inevitably leads to more resignations and retirements.

To make transit agencies workplaces of the future, this report makes the case that agencies must transform Human Resources (HR) into strategic functions that can proactively address future workforce needs, prioritize professional development and succession management, and build a positive workplace culture.

To begin to solve this problem and deliver on transit's important societal goals, agencies must develop a forward-looking people strategy. To make transit agencies workplaces of the future, agencies will need to transform Human Resources (HR) into strategic functions that can proactively address future workforce needs, prioritize professional development and succession management, and build a positive workplace culture. Every step of the transit people pipeline should be re-thought, including: advertising for transit jobs; the length of the hiring process; professional development and support once employees are hired; and how agencies plan for departures.

Large government organizations are not known for their nimbleness or ability to change. Luckily there are agency and HR leaders doing innovative work to address these challenges and examples of best practices from outside the transit industry. Making wide-scale improvements will require partnerships between agencies, unions, community organizations, and educational institutions. In some cases, it will also require policy changes at the local and state level to change how public sector hiring is managed.

Divided into five sections, this report provides recommendations for agency leadership, policy makers, and for community advocates. The first section gives background on the cause of the current crisis. The second discusses the challenges preventing HR departments from being strategic partners and the resources and skill sets they need to succeed. The final three sections highlight needed changes and solutions in hiring practices, retention practices, and organizational culture.

3 What Is Causing the Workforce Crisis

The transit workforce crisis became highly visible as a result of COVID-19. Due to uncertainty and the need to social distance, most agencies slowed down hiring and training at the start of the pandemic. At the same time workers retired and resigned at higher rates. For example, at one large agency the average years of service precipitously dropped from 15 years in 2018 to 11 years in 2022. Later in the pandemic the labor market tightened and some public agencies were less competitive due to less flexible work policies.

Notably, the pandemic exacerbated an existing problem. Transportation officials have known for over 20 years that transit agencies were facing "unprecedented" workforce challenges stemming from coming retirements, shifts in the labor market, and changing technology. In 2003 the Transportation Research Board (TRB) released a special report on *The Workforce Challenge: Recruiting, Training, and Retaining Qualified Workers for Transportation and Transit Agencies*. The report recommended changes that agencies needed to take in their human resources activities over the next two decades "to meet emerging workforce challenges and adjust to labor market realities."[5]

Insight

Key Recommendations of the 2003 TRB Special Report on the Workforce Challenge

☑ Training should be a key priority for agencies, federal partners, private sector, educational institutions, and unions.

☑ More federal funding should be used by state and local agencies for training activities.

☑ Agency leaders must make human resources a strategic function in their agencies.

☑ US DOT should lead an initiative focused on innovation on human resource practices addressing recruitment, training, retention, and succession management.

☑ Transportation agencies should partner with educational institutions for training and workforce development needs.

Some of the recommendations of the 2003 report have been implemented. The FTA has increased their technical assistance and workforce development programs budget. Starting with the 2015 FAST Act, federal grantees can use up to 0.5% of their federal 5307 formula funds for workforce development activities.[6] Some federal grants require training components. For example, the 2023 low and no emissions vehicle grant program required applicants spend 5% of their award on workforce development and training.[7]

There are some great examples of training and workforce development partnerships between agencies and educational, union, private sector, and community partners. In 2021 the APTA released a guide to workforce readiness programs highlighting 35 programs and providing sample materials.[8] However, these programs need to be scaled up as the country is lacking enough workers with the technical skills agencies need.[9]

Overall, transit agency leaders have not taken the necessary step of transforming human resources into a strategic function in their agencies or given HR departments the resources and leverage to fully keep up with changes in the labor market and agency needs.

Changing Labor Market

Transit agencies and the public sector in general have not kept up with changes in the labor market. Previous demand for public sector jobs has diminished for a myriad of reasons. As one transit agency general manager told TransitCenter, "It used to be that people were lining up for transit jobs and that is not the case anymore." For example, the MBTA used to have a lottery to become an operator; people would wait years to get a chance to apply. But as of May 2023, the MBTA was short 200 bus operators, despite the $7,500 signing bonus for operator and other frontline roles it is now providing.

The length of time that people stay in public sector jobs has also decreased, which decreases the value the public sector provides in job security and pension and retirement benefits. The number of public sector workers with tenures of 25 years or more grew through 2004 (people who started before 1980), after which the numbers trended down.[10] The overall change in the US economy toward

Percentage of Workers Over the Age 55 And Over 2022

Category	Percentage
Pipeline	16.3%
Rail	19.7%
Water	23%
Truck	27.8%
Air	30.2%
Transit	42.7%
All transportation	24%
All industries	23.6%
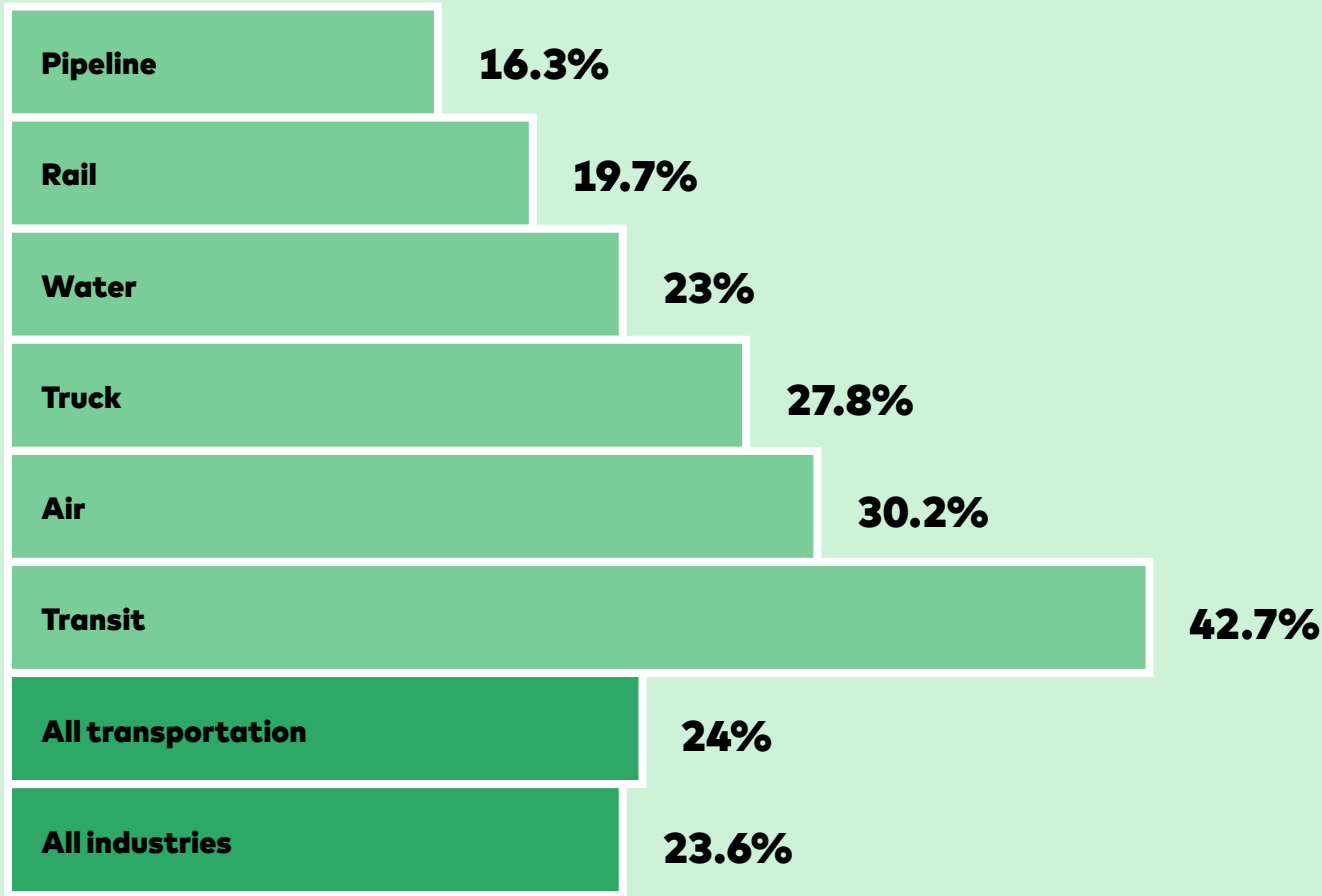
Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *Employment in Transportation,* https://data.bts.gov/stories/s/Transportation-Economic-Trends-Transportation-Empl/caxh-t8jd/

The change in how long people expect to stay with a single employer decreases the value the public sector provides in job security and pension and retirement benefits.

shorter job tenures caught up with the public sector as longtime employees retired and a smaller percent of newer employees stayed for 25 years or more. Public sector workers in January 2022 had a median tenure of 6.8 years compared to 3.7 in the private sector.[11] The change in how long people expect to stay with a single employer decreases the value the public sector provides in job security and pension and retirement benefits.

Transit's looming retirement problem is even larger than other transportation sectors. In 2022, 42.7% of transit workers were 55 and over. Historically the transit workforce has been majority men. In 2014 the transit workforce was 35% women compared to 47% of all US industries.[12] Many of the frontline transit jobs do not have schedules or work rules that align well with the needs of people who also have caretaking roles in their families.

The overall workforce in the US is becoming more diverse. In 2021, Black, Asian, Indigenous, and Hispanic or Latino people made up approximately a third of the US workforce.[13] In transit, Black and Hispanic or Latino workers are overrepresented in lower-paying roles like vehicle cleaners, laborers, and bus operators, and underrepresented in higher-paying and management roles.[14] In order to replace their retiring employees, agencies will have to appeal to younger generations and change their culture to support the advancement of a more diverse workforce.

Younger workers bring with them new expectations of what they are looking for in a workplace. Millennials and Gen Z workers, according to a 2021 global survey, expect employers to support their mental well-being and have an awareness and willingness to speak up about discrimination. Younger generations also place high importance on finding a career that matches their values, including concern about climate change, systemic racism, and wealth inequality.[15] This alignment in priorities could represent a big opportunity for transit agencies to attract younger candidates, but for that to happen, agencies must take steps to become more flexible and supportive workplaces.

Evolving Skill Sets

It takes a lot more people with a wide range of skills than are normally seen by the public to run a transit agency. Agencies need skills and experience in a wide variety of areas like warehousing and logistics, business process and policy, procurement, information technology, data analysis, training and human resources, safety and risk analysis, and communications. All of these roles are impacted by changing technology.

Transit agencies are in the midst of a digital transformation, updating paper, mechanical, and electronic systems to utilize today's technology. Not only will these updates change the skills needed for existing jobs, the transformation itself requires new skills in change management, technology procurement, and implementation. The increasing digitalization also brings an increasing focus on cybersecurity.

Agencies are working to prevent and adapt to climate change. A major step is electrifying their vehicle fleets, which affects maintenance and scheduling processes and the skills and training needed for those jobs. Agencies must keep up by teaching existing employees new skills and creating new roles where necessary.

A public-facing example of technological change over the past decade has been the rise of real-time information. Accurate real-time information on transit vehicle arrivals, crowding, or delays is important for riders and can increase transit usage. This technology has added entirely new roles to transit agencies, or their contractors, from software engineers and user-experience designers to social media managers.

Transit also faces increasing societal challenges. The lack of housing, quality health care, and poverty are creating homelessness, drug addiction, and untreated mental health crises among riders and the general public. Transit workers are on the frontline of these crises. National data show that assaults on frontline workers are increasing, with a large jump starting in 2018.[16] Like too many other workplaces in the US, transit agencies have been forced to grapple with the effect of gun violence on workers and passengers.

All of these challenges are impacting the recruitment and retention of frontline staff. Also agencies are creating new roles to assist in crisis intervention and provide passenger assistance. These roles can require skill sets not already existing at transit agencies, and new classes of employees will need to be recruited, trained, and supported.

Short-Term Capacity Building

Agencies are currently faced with the need to recover from slower hiring during the pandemic, higher attrition rates, and a challenging labor market—all while preparing for the coming wave of retirements.

Many transit agency human resource teams cannot keep up with the hiring needed to address the current vacancies. In addition, an FTA pre-pandemic needs assessment found that 64% of survey respondents were having difficulty recruiting human resource employees.[17] To address their larger problem, agencies are having to implement changes in their human resources departments to increase capacity. Below, we profile four agencies who are attempting to solve short-term capacity problems.

1 Madison Metro

Metro was down 10% of their bus operators even before the pandemic hit. A new general manager started in 2020 and repurposed existing agency staff to supplement the City of Madison human resources department to assist in recruiting and onboarding. The agency transitioned to a continuous hiring process, reviewing applications on a weekly rolling basis. The improvement in speed of processing applications significantly increased the number of applicants that showed up for training. These changes, along with offering a prep class for the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and increasing the starting hourly rate, allowed the agency to fully staff operators by early 2023.

2 Dallas DART

At the beginning of the pandemic, DART implemented a hiring freeze and 300 people accepted a voluntary retirement package. As a result, the agency ended up with 500 vacant positions in a newly tightened labor market. In July 2021, a new general manager prioritized hiring, elevated the work of the HR team, and encouraged collaboration between HR and operations. HR leadership changed the job titles for HR roles to be more attractive (from HR specialist to talent acquisition specialist) and made the language in the job postings for these roles more interesting. They added more staff for recruiting and added contractors to handle administrative work. Additional staffing and removing redundancy in the hiring approval process reduced the time to fill a role from 145 days to 70 (and they are still working to reduce it further). They built an HR community outreach team to go to community events to recruit and host hiring events. Along with changes in compensation, hiring incentives, and national marketing, DART was able to hire enough operators and mechanics to implement their new bus network in January 2022.

3 Chicago CTA

A pre-planned project and serendipitous timing was on CTA's side because they implemented a project that moved bus operator hiring assessments online right before the pandemic hit. Now people can apply and take the assessment to be a bus operator entirely on their mobile device, tablet, or PC without the former social distance requirements. In the summer of 2023 they are implementing asynchronous, on-demand interviews for select positions, including bus operator, to increase the number of interviews recruiters and hiring managers can process in a day. In addition, they built a marketing group in their HR department to promote career opportunities, CTA culture, and increase their applications counts.

4 Boston MBTA

After passing a budget in 2021 that increased agency headcount but not HR headcount, the MBTA realized this wouldn't work. They built a model to determine how many additional recruiters would be needed based on hiring projections and subsequently increased their team to 35 recruiters. This increase has allowed for specialization to align with the seven types of hiring and for recruiters to develop subject matter expertise in the hiring needs of the departments they are matched with. The HR leadership also created career pathways within HR to allow recruiters career growth in the team. With a new position to oversee analytics and process, the HR department created process maps to document the types of hiring and guides for hiring managers to know how to get through the process and what is expected of them. Using five years' worth of data, they created dashboards to manage the performance and workload of the recruiting team. With the additional capacity, the team has increased the number of people hired.

4 Elevating the Role of HR Within an Organization

HR departments can't do workforce planning or help departments identify what skills they are missing without being brought into conversations earlier and being seen as a partner by the heads of the operating, capital and engineering, and administrative departments.

There is a current trend in the private and nonprofit sector to rename human resources teams "People and Culture" teams. The goal is to reflect a shift from HR departments that are transactional and reactive to departments focused on proactive employee services and creating a positive workplace culture. Rather than just being in charge of hiring and firing, HR teams at these organizations are being asked to be strategic partners in the growth and evolution of the organization, as well as overseeing employee health during their tenure. Making this important shift at public transit agencies will require structural changes to the role of human resources departments.

For transit agencies, and other large public sector agencies, the biggest obstacle to overcome is changing the perception of HR as a support service, and a place to look for cost savings, to a strategic partner that requires ongoing investment. As one transit HR leader told us, HR is generally only brought into the room after there is a crisis. But HR departments can't do workforce planning or help departments identify what skills they are missing without being brought into conversations earlier and being seen as a partner by the heads of the operating, capital and engineering, and administrative departments. Many leaders claim that people are their most important resources, but to make this true in practice HR must be considered a core operating department. HR departments must also be adequately staffed and empowered to do more than backfill positions and administer benefits.

In the US the vast majority (73%) of HR employees are women. There is also a higher percent of Black HR employees than overall Black participation in the workforce.[18] Transit HR workers and leaders often reflect this diversity, but this means they can be in the minority of overall transit agency senior managers, which is often white and male. Agency leadership has to be intentional to make sure the role of HR isn't marginalized or disrespected for this or any other reason.

There can be a tension between managers hiring for specialized or technical roles on their teams throughout the agency and HR recruiters, who are generalists by design, assisting them. When HR teams are not empowered or resourced to do more than compliance,

they become the source of a lot of frustration for managers trying to hire for their department. This can create an environment of not respecting HR professionals and agency managers seeing HR as the source of problems rather than solutions.

Another challenge for some transit agencies, depending on their governance structure, is that HR can be outside the direct reporting of the head of the agency. For example, transit agencies run by city governments often rely on the City's HR department. This can make it difficult for the HR needs of transit to get prioritized compared to the needs of every other city department facing a staffing shortage. It also can complicate the hiring rules. Some agencies are governed by their jurisdiction's civil service requirements for hiring. Shared governance of HR also means that transit agencies cannot control the procurement of HR software, availability of data, or other factors impacting hiring and workforce planning. Local officials have to prioritize addressing the hiring challenges impacting transit and transit agencies need the ability to develop internal human resources capacity.

People and Culture Roles and Skills

Changing the role and increasing the capacity of human resources and people and culture teams in transit agencies will require widening their skills and tools. In addition to the traditional areas of hiring, benefits, and performance, HR and related teams should be equipped to focus on employee communications, data analysis and strategic planning, learning and development, and culture change.

In most chronically understaffed agency departments, resources are first allocated to the daily operational needs. In HR departments these are the roles that are processing transactions, especially keeping up with the paperwork needed to hire, administer benefits, and process separations. In this common scenario, it can often feel like it's all a department can do to keep up with hiring needs to backfill vacant roles. But getting ahead of the hiring backlog requires time to dedicate to strategic or proactive planning. In addition to capacity, this will require new training and developing the skill sets within HR and people and culture teams.

Civil Service Requirements

Depending on the governance and location of a transit agency some of their employees can fall under state or city civil service classifications. Civil service was designed to create a merit-based system instead of patronage for government jobs. In general, job seekers take an exam to determine their eligibility for a role and then are placed on a list. Candidates with higher ranks are interviewed first for open positions. This process adds many steps and time to getting hired and can be a deterrent for people unfamiliar with the system or on a shorter timeline. While initially designed to be merit-based, some civil service requirements can create bias and barriers.

The difficulty and format of the exams and the steps in the process vary by jurisdiction and position. Each system requires its own changes, but generally speaking, reforms should make government jobs easier to access, cut down the time to hire, and make sure the exams match the skills needed in the roles. (The exact reforms needed to improve the process at each agency are beyond the scope of this report.)

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) hiring falls under the City of San Francisco Civil Service rules. The SF Civil Service Commission approved a proposal in January 2023 aimed at cutting down the average of 250 days to fill a permanent position by up to 40%. But the changes still hadn't been implemented by June 2023.[19] Many of the changes are aimed at modernizing the process to take advantage of current technology: for example, eliminating a requirement to post on physical bulletin boards. For some high vacancy jobs the civil service exam will be on-demand, so people can immediately get on an eligibility list.[20]

SFMTA informs candidates on their hiring website that it can take two to seven months from the submission of the application to start work. Multiple people shared with TransitCenter that they received a request for an interview with SFMTA five or more months after they applied for a position. Another frustration candidates had was with the inflexible verification of employment or education to prove eligibility. Candidates had to track down supervisors at jobs they held, sometimes years prior, for letters on company letterhead with dates of employment and description of duties and responsibilities.

Civil service requirements can unintentionally favor internal candidates. In 2023 SFMTA shared to their board of directors that recent data showed, not including motor-persons/operator classes, only 20% of their hires were new. An imbalance of internal hires over external hires limits the ability to grow organizational capacity.

Elevating Internal and External Communication

Communicating with potential job applicants and current employees is a critical role. As Alex Lawrence, chief people officer at the City of Boston emphasized, HR communication should be people-focused. Workplace policies should be written in clear language. The rules for hiring need to be clearly communicated to internal hiring managers. To accomplish this, HR departments need employees with strong writing and communication skills.

Part of the communication need is helping internal departments know how to use HR's services. Transit employees often lump all of HR together, but HR teams generally have specialists in different areas. In large agencies supervisors and managers might not know who to reach out to for assistance. One best practice is having a HR liaison or business partner for each of the different divisions. The liaisons develop relationships with managers in their assigned units. This creates a single point of contact for all HR needs, whether it is creating a new position, addressing performance issues, or learning and development opportunities.

Unfortunately, many transit agencies lack good communication infrastructure with their employees. At large agencies like the CTA and MBTA frontline employees don't have email addresses or email access at work. Traditionally agencies have relied on supervisors to print messages to post on bulletin boards or to relay information to employees verbally. Agencies have started to create videos with messages from leadership or set up text message systems to communicate with employees. Upgrading the internal communication infrastructure is critical to making transit agencies workplaces of the future.

The need to improve communication extends to the public as well. Job descriptions and descriptions of benefits and requirements need to be easy for people to understand. And developing relationships with community partners is critical to developing talent pools and pathway programs. For example, DART HR built out a community outreach team to reach potential employees in their neighborhoods, and CTA's HR department created their own marketing roles.

Upgrading internal communication infrastructure is critical to making transit agencies workplaces of the future.

Upgrading Data and Analysis Capabilities

As transit agencies upgrade their workforce technology systems, they are gaining access to higher quality data needed for workforce planning. HR departments will need data analysts, or to provide data training to existing employees, to help leadership understand the trends in hiring and retention across departments and to project hiring needs or identify retention problem areas. In addition, software tools can help HR be more efficient in tracking applications, time-to-hire metrics, and collecting exit interview data. The agency leaders TransitCenter interviewed for this report shared that they are working on implementing new HR data systems and creating the metrics and tracking tools they need. This work requires specific skills that might not already exist on an HR team.

Workforce-Planning to Learning-and-Development Continuum

The work of ensuring an agency has the workforce it needs should be situated on a continuum, from short/individual-term planning to longer organizational projections. The relevant teams need people focused on different time frames and levels of analysis. Each time frame requires different skill sets. While many transit agencies have people doing aspects of this work, agency leadership should make sure these efforts are coordinated across teams and that any gaps are filled in.

In the long-term time frame, workforce planning requires projecting out future hiring and skills needs based on both organizational and industry trends. At this level, employees should be tasked with tracking how technology changes will impact workforce needs. This work should be paired with understanding the existing educational and training pipelines, identifying gaps, and developing partnerships to close them. Many transit agencies lack the capacity to do the long-term analysis.

At the same time, agencies need people working in the medium timeframe to make sure the departments within an agency can translate needs into jobs and career pathways. HR specialists can consult with departments to make sure their organizational structure makes sense

The Problem Is With Public Sector Hiring Overall

An interview with Alex Lawrence, chief people officer of the City of Boston[21]

In 2022, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu appointed Alex Lawrence to the role of chief people officer of the City of Boston. Alex hopes that this challenging moment for government agencies creates the crisis needed to rethink public sector HR, just like the failure of healthcare.gov changed how tech gets built in government.

With Alex's appointment the City of Boston renamed the human resources department "People Operations" and moved it out from the finance department to make more time and space for strategic leadership. Alex is hiring leadership based on people and culture skills. While liability-centered work continues to be important, the department doesn't lead with that frame.

In Alex's experience, the current public sector system was designed to prevent patronage and discrimination in hiring, but this design no longer meets today's problems or matches how people view their careers. She thinks government jobs are a good product that aren't marketed well. The public sector needs to change job descriptions and write benefits in clear language. Alex is accomplishing this at the City of Boston with strategic hires in HR that aren't responsible for daily operational work.

There are ecosystems that support government sectors. Similar to civic tech, governments need outside partners and expertise to help solve today's hiring problems. Borrowing from human-centered design, the Boston People Operations team is piloting changes and scaling what works, starting with how they communicate with employees and rewriting policies to lead with people.[22]

Alex believes that we need to make government work more hospitable. She thinks people should be able to tap in and tap out of government roles before they get burned out, and have the opportunity to take sabbaticals to recharge and gain new skills.

for career pathways and succession planning. They can help team leaders assess if they are utilizing the people they have, what training is needed and what skills are transferable from other roles, and what skills are missing in order to develop and hire any new positions.

Finally, there need to be people focused at the individual level developing and conducting training and providing career coaching for employees. All three time-frame levels need to be working in synch to identify the needed skills, the skills gap in the organization, and the training and hiring plans to address those gaps in the short and long-term.

Balancing Liability and Culture Building

A certain amount of human resources work has to center liability. Hiring processes cannot violate laws or discriminate. Benefits, FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act), and other leaves must be properly administered. Employee EEO (Equal Employment Opportunity) complaints need to be investigated. However, if the liability aspect of the work is the central focus of the department this can become the frame through which all problems are seen and addressed. Liability is not the same as accountability, and an overfocus on liability can negatively impact workplace culture.

In addition to staff with the legal and compliance skills, transit agencies need roles dedicated to developing a workplace culture that centers their values. In many cases, this will require changing existing workplace cultures that aren't healthy or equitable, and creating new processes and programs for addressing conflict and increasing employee well-being.

Liability is not the same as accountability, and an overfocus on liability can negatively impact workplace culture.

Table 1

Workforce-Planning to Learning-and-Development Continuum

Time frame	Level/Scope of Thinking	What	Skills Needed
Long	Industry/Organization	Project workforce needs, changing skill sets and technology, pathway programs	Data analysis, industry scans, developing educational partnerships
Medium	Team/ departments within organization	Creating career pathways, identifying needed skills and experiences, succession planning	Organizational development, understanding transferable skills
Short	Individual	Professional development and career coaching	People skills, developing and conducting trainings

Source: Bertran Paget-Seekins Consulting

✓ Agency Recommendations

→ **Agency leadership has to ensure that HR is a strategic partner** in the organization. This can include where they sit in the organization and the resources they have available, but might also require addressing any tension or lack of respect between HR and key departments.

→ **Agencies need to prioritize employee communications** and elevate these skills in their HR teams. This includes using people-centered language in job postings, benefits and policies, and creating the communication infrastructure to reach all employees.

→ **HR and people and culture departments have to be staffed with all the skill sets they need** to build a continuum from workforce planning to learning and development.

✓ Policymaker Recommendations

→ **Local officials need to work to address any constraints** that come from civil service requirements or the HR capacity of that jurisdiction.

Elevating the Role of HR within an Organization

⑤ Hiring Practices

Transit agencies have a job for nearly every type of potential skill set. In addition to the frontline positions of operators, mechanics, and dispatchers, they need skilled tradespeople, engineers and planners, construction managers, accountants, IT specialists, and lawyers. Often large organizations, transit agencies require people skilled in managing people and being the connectors between departments.

Almost all of these jobs have private sector equivalents, meaning that there are existing talent pools to draw from and leverage. And this means that the public sector is actively competing with the private sector for talent and must make their hiring practices competitive.

Transit agencies will have to hire many employees to respond to current shortages and coming retirements. Given the changes in the labor market, success will require more than just increasing recruiting capacity in HR teams.

There are a number of types of mismatches between the jobs at transit agencies and people to fill them. Each of the mismatches needs its own solutions.

The key problems facing transit hiring are lack of awareness of transit jobs and their benefits, lack of training or qualifications, hiring practices that deter job seekers, and salaries and schedules that aren't competitive.

The MBTA needs to hire 2,800 people (almost 50% of its current headcount) over the next year to backfill vacancies and staff new positions to address safety, increase service, and implement new programs.[23]

Career Awareness and Marketing

Raising awareness of transit careers is a starting place. Transit agencies are developing marketing campaigns and community outreach teams to let people know about opportunities. Part of this marketing should include a better explanation of all the benefits of a public service job.

Most younger job seekers likely don't know how to compare health insurance benefits or retirement plans. Descriptions should include real-life examples of the benefits, rather than relying on overly technical language. For example, they should outline how their health care and parental leave policies can defray the cost of having a baby or the kinds of lives their generous retirement packages enable people to live. Agencies should also do a better job of advertising the public service loan forgiveness that can come with 10 years of employment in the public

sector and appeal to the desire among younger workers to find jobs that align with their values and concerns about climate change and racial injustice.

Overly sterile or "government-speak" job descriptions and postings can discourage people from applying. Job postings and titles need to give people a clear description of what the job does. A best practice can be found in the City of Oakland, California, which includes sections in its job postings titled, "What you will typically be responsible for," "A few reasons you might love this job," and "A few challenges you might face in this job." Another best practice several agencies shared is matching job descriptions and titles to private sector equivalents. This was particularly recommended when the transit job being advertised is in technology or IT.

Jobs that require drug testing, medical screening, and background checks should clearly state what is disqualifying. Qualified applicants might be discouraged from applying if they don't know what agencies are looking for at each phase of a hiring process. Transit agencies in the growing number of states where recreational marijuana is legal should be using modern drug testing technology, and inform applicants upfront when and how frequently they will be tested.

Training Programs and Training Access

Many specialized jobs at agencies—like engineering and maintaining rail signal and power systems—do not have enough qualified applicants in the pipeline to replace the looming number of retirements. This is primarily due to a lack of training programs. In 2021, APTA produced a detailed report highlighting existing workforce readiness programs, especially targeted at disadvantaged young people.[24] These programs will have to be scaled up as a 2015 federal report estimated that across the transportation industry the projected annual job openings are 68% higher than the projected number of students completing relevant educational programs annually.[25]

Once agencies identify the critical roles that are lacking qualified hiring pools, they need assistance from unions, educational institutions, and community organizations to get training programs in place. Since training takes time, ideally agencies should be projecting out critical

Mismatch Between Jobs and Job Seekers

Jobs	Solutions	Job Seekers
Attractive jobs that agencies aren't marketing well or with confusing postings	Career Awareness and Marketing	People don't know about available roles or careers
Jobs without adequate training programs or career pathways to gain the needed skills	Training Programs and Access to Training	People don't have the training or qualifications
Unnecessary requirements or hiring processes keeping out qualified people	Changing Requirements and Improving the Hiring Process	People who are interested and qualified and are being deterred by hiring processes
Jobs that aren't attractive or competitive (due to factors like compensation or scheduling)	Making Jobs More Competitive	People who are interested, but jobs aren't attractive

needs based on their retirement forecasts in order to build their talent pipeline.

Transit agencies' relationships in the community have to extend from gathering feedback from riders to gathering feedback from potential employees. Community organizations, houses of worship, and second chance programs can support job training programs and help agencies identify barriers to their members accessing needed training.

Changing Requirements

One key barrier to getting people in the door is job requirements. Many public sector jobs have very specific requirements and a strict hiring process to only consider people who meet the minimum requirements. Often these requirements value certifications or degrees over work experience. These rules may have been written with good intentions, but the requirements themselves create inequitable barriers. For example, requirements for a certain number of years of a clean driving record can disproportionately impact Black drivers, who are more likely to be pulled over or ticketed for the same infractions as white drivers. Or requirements for very specific college majors can disqualify people who learned the skills or subject matter through alternative methods. Jobs that do not require driving should not require a driver's license.

Job requirements need to be reviewed to consider equity through new lenses and to provide for multiple pathways for acquiring skills. This can be a large undertaking and require a joint effort between agencies and unions. But it is critical to reducing barriers to candidates who could succeed in roles. It is also important to update job requirements to better reflect the technology skills needed in many roles. There are resources available for government agencies using skills-based hiring.[26]

Creating fewer specific requirements and considering what skills can transfer from other types of roles or experiences will require more time and effort from HR representatives and hiring managers in the hiring process. It runs counter to the growing use of software programs to screen applications for minimum requirements. These programs can also screen out qualified candidates who do not know the exact keywords to use. Overly repetitive or "buggy" online applications can also lead to applicants not completing applications. Agencies need to

People Who Are Interested and Qualified and Are Being Deterred by Hiring Processes

There are people dedicated to transit who are being deterred due to agency bureaucracy alone. Clara [name changed] had been trying to find a job in public transit in her metro region for eight years. She found the hiring process opaque. Coming from the private sector, she didn't know how to figure out which postings were a good fit for her skills and interests. She had applied for roles at the agency over the years and never heard back. Finally, she got a temporary position and it was her dream job. Her department is understaffed, and at least four people with permanent roles have recently left. Her supervisor wants her to stay but can't promise there will be a permanent position at the end of her temporary contract. So at the time of our interview she was already looking for a new job outside the agency even though she wants to stay.

assess their software programs from the perspective of time-savings for the agency and for applicants.

Improving the Hiring Process

Another major barrier transit employees and job candidates identified was the time it takes to get hired. In the City of San Francisco, the average time to fill a civil service job is 250 days. The Dallas transit agency, without civil service, had an average time of 145 days to fill positions before implementing reforms. The good news is that all of the agencies TransitCenter spoke to are working to reduce the length of time their hiring processes take. The steps they are taking include: reducing the number of internal steps and approvals in their processes, reviewing applications on a rolling basis, allowing applicants to pre-record interviews, and training hiring managers on their responsibilities in the process. These steps require a mix of process

Making Job Descriptions Clearer

Your Local Transit Agency

✓ **Job Title** ← Interesting title, not government jargon

✓ **Salary** ← Actual salary, not internal bands or steps

✓ **Description** ← What does this job actually do?

✓ **Minimum Qualifications** ← Make as broad as possible, allow for alternative paths

✓ **Requirements** ← If there is a drug test or background check, say what is disqualifying

✓ **Benefits** ← Explain in plain language, including when they start

✓ **Selection Process** ← Explain all the steps and expected timeline

improvements, new technology, and increasing HR capacity and resources.

Potential job seekers are also interviewing the agency to see if the job and workplace culture are a good fit, and it is important that transit agencies generate a good impression from the hiring process. Given long hiring timelines, HR recruiters should be keeping job seekers in the loop about the status of their applications. And even if a candidate isn't a good fit for one job, they might be a good fit for a future role or could recommend the agency to friends and family. How agencies communicate with applicants, even if they are rejected, is pivotal for building the reputation of the agency as a desirable workplace. Multiple job seekers TransitCenter spoke to brought up being ghosted, even after they had been interviewed, or getting a rejection many months after their application.

Agencies should conduct user testing of their hiring processes, including the public-facing technology platforms. This could help to identify places in the process that are discouraging applicants or where qualified applicants are not getting through screens. Agencies can also collect data on the hiring process by surveying applicants, regardless of whether they are ultimately hired, to inform necessary improvements.

Civic Tech Support

There are a growing number of nonprofit organizations creating a supportive ecosystem for technology professionals entering and working in public service and helping government agencies find technology talent. For example, Tech Talent is a nonprofit that helps the federal government recruit technology talent.[29] U.S. Digital Response partners with governments and public agencies on technology projects.[30] The Digital Service Network provides a resource library and events for public sector leaders in the use of technology, data, and design to improve services.[31] Transit agencies can utilize their resources and models for building pathways between people with technology skills and transit jobs.

Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) did a compensation study of all full-time employees and increased their salary and wages budget between FY22 and FY23 by $30.4 million, an 11.5% increase, without adding any new positions.[28]

Making Jobs More Competitive

Historically, public sector jobs have been a buyer's market, but that has changed. In 2023, APTA reported that "applicants reject transit agencies' employment offers 35% of the time, more than twice the rate for jobs across all industries."[27] Not only are agencies going to need to do a better job of marketing jobs, they are going to have to make jobs more competitive.

Compensation is a factor. Some agencies have policies to only hire candidates new to the agency at the bottom of the hiring range regardless of their experience. This discourages qualified candidates from applying or accepting positions. However, hiring at higher levels can create inequalities with existing employees. Addressing compensation to make roles more competitive requires doing a full compensation study for all employees.

The growing role of technology and data analytics in transit agencies is creating new positions that can require different salary structures to be competitive with the private sector. Luckily the public service aspect of working in transit can be a big selling point; however, transitioning from technology companies to the public sector can be a big culture change. The civic tech community provides a lot of resources for both job seekers and public agencies.

While outside the scope of this report, it is important to mention that in addition to compensation, for some roles, agencies and unions will have to find ways to address problematic work schedules. When work schedules are picked by seniority—as they are at many agencies—entry level roles can be very unappealing and hard for caregivers to fill.

Summary

US Workforce and Immigration

Due to slower population growth and reduced immigration, the projected growth of the US workforce is 0.5% annually over the next decade.[32] Increasing immigration is the quickest way to increase growth of the workforce. Currently immigrants make up 17% of the US workforce. [33] Immigrants are already a key component of the taxi and trucking industry. Immigrants make up 19% of the long-haul truck drivers in the US.[34] Often immigrant workers cluster in industries as friends and family help newer arrivals find jobs and learn skills. Transit agencies should work with local immigrant community organizations to perform an assessment of barriers and the steps that can be taken to be more welcoming to immigrant employees.

Agency Recommendations

→ **Improve explanations and marketing of all benefits** using clear people focused language.

→ **Perform user experience testing** on the hiring process and application software from the applicant's perspective. Set an aggressive time to hire targets and resource the HR team to be able to meet them.

→ **Perform across-the-board compensation studies** to establish competitive salaries, adjusting existing salaries accordingly and updating salary ranges for job postings.

→ **Revise job descriptions** to clearly explain the role and broaden requirements to allow for multiple pathways to gaining needed skills.

⑥ Retention Practices

The biggest differences in satisfaction between current and former workers were in agency responsiveness to worker concerns, counting on their supervisor to solve a problem, and whether the path to promotions was clear.

Hiring gets people in the door, but then agencies need to make them want to stay. APTA reports that at transit agencies twice as many employees depart in their first two years of employment as retire.[35] The pandemic increased departure rates, a trend that has continued at some agencies.[36]

In 2022 APTA surveyed agencies and former frontline and operation workers and found the biggest differences in satisfaction between current and former workers were in agency responsiveness to worker concerns, counting on their supervisor to solve a problem, and whether the path to promotions was clear. Current and former workers and agencies agreed that significant factors leading workers to leave were compensation and work schedules. Former workers also ranked on-the job-harassment and assault as important factors.[37] In TransitCenter's interviews with current and former office workers, many people cited understaffing and the accompanying burnout, frustration with bureaucratic processes, lack of support from leadership to solve problems, overall lack of accountability, and feeling that there weren't viable career pathways.

Several HR leaders TransitCenter spoke to pointed out that retention is everyone's job. HR can't keep up with hiring if there is a hole in the bottom of the bucket. In this section we covered how HR departments can provide support for retention with management training, professional development, and career pathways. In the next section we will address burnout and support from management.

Invest in Training

Fundamentally, agencies need to invest in their workforce. A general rule of thumb is that organizations should spend at least 2–4% of their wages and salary budget on training and professional development to help people advance in the organization. FTA recommends 3% and according to a federal report "on average transit agencies commit less than 0.5% of payroll to training."[38] It can be difficult to track comprehensive training and professional development spending in agency budgets. In the Chicago Transit Authority's 2022 budget, the training and workforce development

department received just over 2% of their labor budget. [39] LA Metro conducts activity-based budgeting and training was allocated just under 2% of their rail and bus labor budget in 2023.[40] These percentages likely do not include all professional development spending at their agency.

Agencies have training programs for entry-level jobs like bus operators or other new employees; sometimes leadership training is available for executives. But often there are fewer training opportunities for existing employees.[41] Agencies should be investing in training throughout the organization at all levels. A pre-pandemic survey of agencies found that some of the biggest barriers to training were scheduling time off and a lack of resources.[42] Realistic training budgets need to account for additional staff levels to cover shifts for people in training or other professional development activities.

One form of training that can be successful at retention is mentoring programs by more senior employees. Mentors can assist in technical skill building and provide support on pathways to success and career coaching. For bus operators, mentoring can increase retention and attendance and reduce accidents and complaints.[43]

In the short-term, successful training programs will require more financial resources, but in the long run, hiring and onboarding costs will be reduced by improved retention rates. There are federal and sometimes state resources for training and development. Federal grantees can use up to 0.5% of their federal 5307 formula funds for workforce development activities.

Create Career Pathways

Every transit agency employee needs to be given clear information about how to advance, what skills are needed, and how they can obtain those skills. Ideally, for each position in the organization there should be an associated core training for that role and training needed to advance to the next role. The pathways should not be contained to roles in operations. People should have the ability to move from operations into management and administration roles, and there should be consideration of multiple ways to gain the skills needed in these roles. Agencies and unions should work together to institutionalize workforce development.

Graphic

Example Career Progression: MBTA Heavy Rail
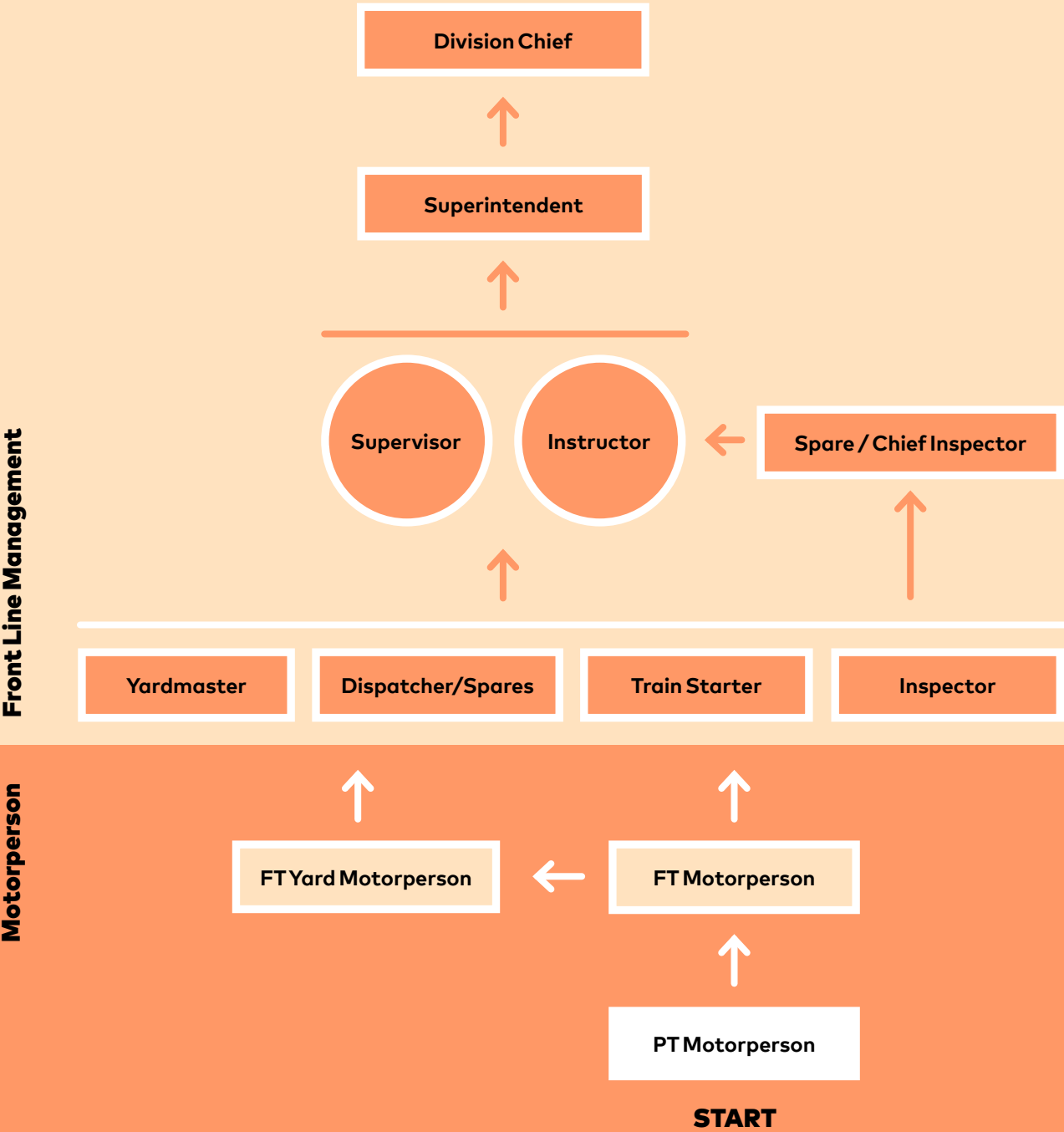
It is worth noting that, depending on an agency's salaries and overtime possibilities, there can be financial disincentives for people to move up into management roles. This is another reason to conduct comprehensive salary studies and to fully staff agencies to reduce overtime. These barriers need to be removed so that talented employees do not face a financial penalty for taking on leadership roles.

There should be career advancement opportunities that are not dependent on, as several people we interviewed commented, "waiting for someone to retire." This should include creating advancement tracks for high-performing individual contributors, especially in highly technical areas, that do not require taking on management roles.

Supervisors also need to be realistic that for certain roles, depending on room for growth, some employees might only stay three to five years. For example, an entry level data analyst might only stay three years without an opportunity for a promotion. To replace positions with high turnover rates, agencies can create internship programs and relationships with colleges and universities to speed up the recruiting and training process.

Agencies should invest in professional development for people considered low-risk departures as well as high-risk departures. Not only is it a matter of equity to invest in all employees, it is important because low-risk departures will become leaders by seniority, so their leadership skills should be nurtured. Allowing people to leave for sabbaticals or short-term opportunities in other sectors with the ability to return to their positions is another way to build skills and allow people to avoid burnout.

A critical need at all levels of agencies is supervision and leadership training. People are promoted due to technical skills or seniority, but this doesn't mean they know how to lead or manage colleagues. Skills like giving feedback to employees, handling personnel matters equitably, and creating psychological safety need to be practiced. As the APTA data revealed, people leave organizations if they aren't supported by their supervisor.

A critical need at all levels of agencies is supervision and leadership training. People are promoted due to technical skills or seniority, but this doesn't mean they know how to lead or manage colleagues.

One small agency shared with TransitCenter that of their approximately 100 employees, four are under 45 years old and the average age of their drivers is 65.

Implement Succession Planning

Employees also leave due to retirement. The problem of high levels of workers nearing retirement is particularly acute in smaller agencies. One small agency shared with TransitCenter that of their approximately 100 employees, four are under 45 years old and the average age of their drivers is 65. Another leader shared that when they started at the agency the shortest tenure of a manager was 17 years. Smaller agencies have fewer people internally ready to take on the roles of retiring employees; often there is limited documentation when an employee has held the same position for over a decade.

Many people TransitCenter spoke to shared that while their agency discusses succession planning, it is often not implemented. Some agencies have a policy to not post or hire a role until the incumbent leaves. This creates no time for training or a situation where an employee is performing a new role while training their successor. One key component of succession planning is knowledge management and making sure that key aspects of roles are documented before long-time employees leave.

There are many existing resources on workforce development, knowledge management, and succession planning programs for agencies to draw on. The Transportation Research Board, **Transit Cooperative Research Program** (TCRP), and National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) have resources for transit agencies and state departments of transportation. For example, in 2017 TRCP published **Knowledge Management Resources to Support Strategic Workforce Development for Transit Agencies**. FTA and FHWA sponsor workshops and fund technical assistance programs that support workforce development. The **National Transit Institute** develops and provides training and materials for transit professionals. The **Transit Workforce Center** supports agencies with recruitment, hiring and training, especially for frontline workers. **APTA** provides workforce development resources to its members and APTA and the **Eno Center** conduct leadership development programs for transportation professionals.

The tools and resources exist. But to be successful, agencies have to prioritize training and succession planning and integrate them into daily operations.

Agency Recommendations

→ **Appropriate budgeting for training and development,** including budgeting for staff time to attend training.

→ **Establish career pathways and training needs** for positions and make sure employees have access to career coaching.

→ **In-depth and reoccurring supervisor training** at all levels that give people the tools to provide feedback and support their team members.

→ **Implement succession planning and knowledge management programs.**

7 Workplace Culture

Workers are leaving transit agencies in part due to high stress and burnout. Women and people of color are demanding changes to workplaces that historically have not been inclusive or designed for them, by them, or with them in mind. Younger workers are bringing different expectations in the workplace. To be workplaces of the future, transit agencies have to change their workplace culture to be more equitable, supportive, and more conducive to employee well-being. Some of the needed changes include focusing on employee well-being, supportive supervision, and changing how workplace conflict is addressed.

Transforming workplace cultures is difficult and requires deliberate policies, programs, and a dedicated team to manage implementation.

Focusing on Well-Being

The nature of 24/7 transit operations can create a crisis-driven workplace culture. The organizational bandwidth is often limited to responding to daily problems as they arise. There is a common agency saying that "you are only as good as your last rush hour." Few agencies have the capacity for rest, reflection, and growth before the next challenge.

Layered on top of this general ethos are years of underinvestment in maintenance, chronic understaffing, a pandemic, and the impact of insufficient housing, quality health care, and poverty on transit systems. It is no surprise that transit workers are stressed and burned-out. The FTA has put together resources on **transit workers' mental health** and there is a TCRP study underway on mental health and wellness for transit workers.

Employees have to recharge. One of the benefits of public sector jobs is paid vacation and sick days. But understaffing and the sense of responsibility in public service can prevent people from taking the days they need and have earned. The culture of transit agencies should encourage workers to fully use their vacation days. While managing unscheduled absences of frontline employees is difficult, employees should be able to use sick days for physical and mental

> To be workplaces of the future, transit agencies have to change their workplace culture to be more equitable, supportive, and more conducive to employee well-being.

In addition to physical safety in the workplace, people need psychological safety. It is important for well-being and for successful workplaces. This type of safety allows people to speak up about concerns, admit mistakes, and share new ideas without fear of retaliation.

health reasons. Preventing burnout is important for individuals' health and for the retention of employees. Agencies need to be staffed at levels that account for employees using their vacation and sick days.

All workplaces take emotional labor to run. This is particularly true in workplaces with high levels of stress. The emotional labor is happening, but it is generally not recognized or compensated. People of color and women end up carrying the majority of this uncompensated labor.[44] It can take the form of providing support to colleagues or dealing with the impacts of being marginalized in the workplace. Solutions include reducing workplace marginalization and compensating people for their support work. One way to do this is to create a peer support program and train workers to do this work in a more formal way. In some cases, frontline workers can support each other better since they know the experience of the job.

Supportive Supervision

Unfortunately, the culture at many transit agencies is not always supportive or positive. TransitCenter received reports of yelling and intimidation, pressure to not raise concerns, being ignored by supervisors when asking for help, and punitive discipline for frontline workers for missing work or breaking rules.

In addition to physical safety in the workplace, people need psychological safety. It is important for well-being and for successful workplaces. This type of safety allows people to speak up about concerns, admit mistakes, and share new ideas without fear of retaliation.[45] Employees have to trust their supervisors to bring up problems.

Transit agencies place a lot of emphasis on physical safety, but psychological safety needs to be just as much a part of creating and maintaining "safety culture" at transit agencies. Transit agencies are hierarchical organizations, and if there isn't psychological safety, there is risk of abuse of power and retaliation. Explicit leadership is required to create a culture where retaliation is not tolerated. This means agencies have to collect data and conduct root-cause analysis for psychological safety concerns as well as physical ones.

Relying on your supervisor to help solve problems is an important factor in employee satisfaction and retention. An approach gaining interest, especially since the COVID pandemic, is trauma-informed management. Trauma-informed care has been taking shape over the past 20 years in social services and medicine, and is a holistic approach to understanding how someone's lived experiences shapes their interactions and behaviors. Trauma-informed management in public service recognizes that people can come to jobs with their own trauma and can absorb the trauma of the public. Aspects of trauma-informed management include psychological safety, peer support, transparency, organizational self-reflection, seeking worker input, and cultural competency.[46] Transit agencies should incorporate trauma-informed management into their training for supervisors and into discipline policies.

Addressing Employee Conflict and Complaints

In a 2019 transit agency employee survey, the top skills respondents identified as lacking were leadership and supervising skills, conflict resolution, and communication.[47] Training supervisors in conflict resolution is one step forward, as is creating new methods for addressing conflict.[48]

Case Study

Transformative Mediation

The US Postal Service created a program called Redress in 1994 after a class-action lawsuit about their EEO process. The program provides a voluntary option before a formal EEO process. A trained outside mediator facilitates a discussion between the parties with the goal of resolving the conflict and improving communication.

Sessions are on the clock and scheduled within a few weeks of the request.[49] A formal EEO process is available if the parties don't reach an agreement. Research shows Redress is successful at closing complaints and improving workplace relationships.

One concrete practice is offering ways for employees to raise complaints or address conflicts before they reach the need for a formal EEO complaint or that fall outside EEO. There are many workplace behaviors that need to be addressed that aren't covered under EEO but sometimes end up in EEO processes due to the lack of another channel for addressing them. While EEO is needed for some issues, EEO complaints are a slow process and governed by strict privacy rules. The process can prevent quick resolutions and limit analysis needed to find patterns or bigger problems.

One method to reduce conflict in the workplace is neutral third-party transformative mediation. Transformative mediation gets at the relationship and emotional issues in a conflict instead of the traditional mediation focused on legal settlements. These programs should be structured to also collect data while protecting confidentiality, so agencies can identify systemic problems creating conflicts.[48]

Organizations tend to approach employee complaints or concerns through a lens of liability. The organizational goal is often to limit its own liability, not to address the problem or be accountable for their practices. Just as transportation justice organizers have pushed transportation agencies to be accountable for their inequitable decisions impacting the public, agencies must also apply an accountability framework to inequitable agency practices impacting employees. In an accountability framework, agencies acknowledge past or current inequitable decisions or impacts, address or remedy harms, and change their practices and policies.

When employees report harassment or discriminatory behavior and/or discriminatory policies and practices, the response should be to determine the cause and address it, even if it opens the agency up to liability for having allowed the practice. Compliance with federal civil rights protections, whether Title VI for the public or EEO for employees, should be considered the bare minimum for equity.

From TransitCenter's interviews we have found that another source of transit workers' frustration and conflict was not with individuals, but with broken processes and organizational systems. Agencies need a structured way to collect data on these frustrations and inefficiencies in order to prioritize fixes. One option would be a team focused on continuous improvement and organizational process improvement. Many large transit agencies already have these teams but might lack a systematic way that employees can identify or nominate the most vexing process problems.

Overall culture change is the responsibility of agency leadership. But they will need HR and culture and people teams to put changes into practice, such as designing and running trainings, creating alternative complaint processes, creating peer support programs, and analyzing data on sources of complaints and conflicts. This will require resources and committed people with skills in organizational change in order to be successful.

✅ Agency Recommendations

→ **Track data on psychological safety** of employees and address root causes.

→ **Create a transformative mediation option** for non-EEO complaints or pre-EEO complaints.

→ **Shift from a culture of liability** to a culture of accountability in addressing employee complaints.

→ **Create peer support programs** with formal training to recognize the emotional labor of employees and provide support to fellow employees in a structured way.

→ **Create ways for employees to report broken systems and processes** to help prioritize process improvement work.

8 Conclusion

Great public transit is critical to our collective future. It is an essential component of bringing down greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector and keeping our economy moving. Well-designed transit can improve social equity, bring communities together, and even spark joy. Emerging out of the COVID pandemic, we need more transit, not less, to better serve all types of trips at all times of day.

Public transit is not just buses and trains. To function, transit needs people, and it needs people with many different skills and expertise. But the industry is deeply struggling to attract and retain the people necessary to run great service. The aging workforce is retiring and taking valuable knowledge with them. There aren't enough skilled workers trained and ready to take their places.

To be competitive workplaces of the future, public transit agencies will have to evolve. Hiring practices must adjust to the expectations of today's workforce and the realities of the current labor market. Agencies must invest in their workforce to increase retention and retain the knowledge that will be lost with retirements. Agency leadership must prioritize culture change and implement policy changes and programs to better address conflict and improve communication. And leadership must empower HR and people and culture departments to carry out those changes.

This workforce crisis was predicted 20 years ago and we did not do enough to prevent it. Professional development and training for employees is like preventative maintenance for vehicles and infrastructure. It is easy to not prioritize, but there are long-term impacts in not doing so. To prevent the next crisis, we must integrate these changes into the standard operations of agencies.

Accomplishing these changes requires that agencies elevate human resources and people and culture teams to the level of strategic partner within agencies. They will need the leadership support, resources, and skilled staff to shift from trying to keep up with the transactions to enacting strategic planning and organizational and culture change work. The task is huge, and agencies will need help from unions, transit advocates, community organizations, educational institutions, and policymakers.

In the short-term these changes will cost money to implement. However, they should pay off in the long-term by attracting more

talent and increasing retention. This will make agencies more efficient, increase their organizational capacity, and make service safer and more reliable for the public. And it will make the thousands of transit agency employees feel safe, satisfied, and supported in their jobs.

We all deserve access to great transit, in order for that to happen, we need to set agencies up to be able to more effectively deliver on their mission. By joining together to solve this problem, we can create the kind of transit systems that allow our communities to fully thrive.

9 Recommendations for Advocates

Advocates and organizers play the essential role of connecting the dots between lackluster transit service and under-investment in the transit workforce. Below are a set of recommended changes for advocates to seek from their local agencies. When building public support for these changes it's critical to focus on the outcomes that these changes will make, and save the technicalities for meetings with key decision makers. Gaps in service, delays in new projects, inadequate consultation of transit riders can all be traced, in part, to government agencies' current inability or unwillingness to adequately invest in recruitment, training and the kind of workplace practices that keep people in the job. In public communications on the topic, advocates should explain that these changes are all viable, but are dependent on specific government leaders (name them), who have the authority to reorder priorities and act in service of our communities.

→ **Make the case for training and development money** in transit agency operating budgets and grant applications. Ask that your agency commit to at least 3% of their labor budget for employee training and development.

→ **Push for civil service reform** if that applies to your area and streamlining HR processes in your city or state depending on the governance structure of your local transit agencies.

→ **Advocate for more money** for transit knowing it is going to cost more to provide the same amount of service in order to make transit agencies healthy workplaces.

→ **Support transit job training programs** with local community colleges, unions, and technical high schools.

→ **Help agencies identify barriers** for your community members to access agency jobs. Immigrant community–based organizations can help assess whether an agency's hiring practices and culture are welcoming and accessible for immigrant workers.

→ **Apply the same accountability framework for transportation justice** to agency decisions about employees as decisions about how agencies serve the public.

Endnotes

1. American Public Transportation Association. (2023). Transit Workforce Shortage: Synthesis Report. https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Workforce-Shortage-Synthesis-Report-03.2023.pdf

2. Hanks, Douglas. (2023, June 22). Can Miami-Dade County finally streamline its public bus service, reduce waiting time? Miami Herald. https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article276408211.html

3. King County Metro. (2023, June 7). Transit Service Update: Peak weekday routes 16, 232, 237, 301, 304, 320 will be suspended June 12-23; alternative available. https://kingcountymetro.blog/2023/06/07/transit-service-update-peak-weekday-routes-16-232-237-301-304-and-320-will-be-suspended-june-12-16-alternatives-available/

4. Murray, Jon. (2023, June 25). Special report: RTD can't seem to overcome its labor shortage - a problem that's affecting bus and train riders. The Denver Post. https://www.denverpost.com/2023/06/25/regional-transportation-district-bus-train-operators-staffing/

5. National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. (2003). The Transportation Workforce Challenge: Recruiting, Training, and Retaining Qualified Workers for Transportation and Transit Agencies – Special Report 275. https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/10764/the-transportation-workforce-challenge-recruiting-training-and-retaining-qualified-workers-for-transportation-and-transit-agencies

6. Federal Transit Administration. (2016). FAST Act Factsheet: Urbanized Area Formula Program Grants. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/5307%20Urbanized%20Area%20Formula%202%20Program%20Fact%20Sheet_1.pdf

7. Federal Transit Administration. Low or No Emission Vehicle Program – 5339c. Accessed July 16, 2023. https://www.transit.dot.gov/lowno

8. American Public Transportation Association. (2021). Transit Workforce Readiness Guide. https://www.apta.com/document/transit-workforce-readiness-guide/

9. US Department of Education, US Department of Labor, and US Department of Transportation. (2015). Strengthening Skills Training and Career Pathways Across the Transportation Industry. https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/Strengthening_Skills_Training_and_Career_Pathways_Across_Transportation_Industry_Data_Report.pdf

10. Copeland, Craig. (2023, January 19). Trends in Employee Tenure, 1983-2022. Employee Benefit Research Institute. https://www.ebri.org/content/trends-in-employee-tenure-1983-2022

11. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022, September 22). Employee Tenure in 2022. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/tenure.pdf

12. US Department of Education, US Department of Labor, and US Department of Transportation. (2015). Strengthening Skills Training and Career Pathways Across the Transportation Industry. https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/Strengthening_Skills_Training_and_Career_Pathways_Across_Transportation_Industry_Data_Report.pdf

13. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2021. https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2021/home.htm

14. US Department of Education, US Department of Labor, and US Department of Transportation. (2015). Strengthening Skills Training and Career Pathways Across the Transportation Industry. https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/Strengthening_Skills_Training_and_Career_Pathways_Across_Transportation_Industry_Data_Report.pdf

15. Deloitte. (2021). A call for accountability and action: the Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/2021-deloitte-global-millennial-survey-report.pdf

16. Federal Transit Administration. (2021, February 24). Addressing Operator Assault Through Your Agency's Safety Management System. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-02/Addressing-Operator-Assault-Webinar-20210224.pdf

17. Noland, R., DiPetrillo, S., & Lubin, A. (2021). Identifying Current and Future Training Needs of the Public Transportation Industry. Federal Transit Administration Report 0191. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-06/FTA-Report-No-0191.pdf

18. Datawheel. DataUSA: Human resource workers. Accessed July 16, 2023. https://datausa.io/profile/soc/human-resources-workers#demographics

19. Moench, Mallory. (2023, June 22). S.F. hailed effort to cut 255-day wait to hire a city worker. It's still tried up in red tape. The San Francisco Chronicle. https://www.sfchronicle.com/sf/article/sf-hiring-delays-reform-bureaucracy-18166319.php

20. City of San Francisco. (2023, January 26). Civil Service Commission Approves Proposal to Expedite City Hiring in San Francisco. https://sf.gov/news/civil-service-commission-approves-proposal-expedite-city-hiring-san-francisco

21. For a longer profile on the City of Boston People Management, see People-Centered HR in the City of Boston from the Digital Service Network. https://beeckcenter.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DSN-Spotlight_Boston-People-Management_v3.pdf

22. For example, see the City of Boston Parental Leave brochure: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BfWK6rlcQx4HDey7mgzm0Dkxvh7_dzlI/view

23. Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation. (2023, April 3). Labor Shortages Raise Doubts About the MBTA's Capabilities. https://www.masstaxpayers.org/sites/default/files/publications/2023-03/Labor%20Shortages%20at%20the%20MBTA%20FINAL.pdf

24. American Public Transportation Association. (2021). Transit Workforce Readiness Guide. https://www.apta.com/document/transit-workforce-readiness-guide/

25. US Department of Education, US Department of Labor, and US Department of Transportation. (2015). Strengthening Skills Training and Career Pathways Across the Transportation Industry. https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/Strengthening_Skills_Training_and_Career_Pathways_Across_Transportation_Industry_Data_Report.pdf

26. Zhavoronkova, M.& Naranjo, K. (2022, November 21). The Benefits of Skills-Based Hiring for the State and Local Government Workforce. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-benefits-of-skills-based-hiring-for-the-state-and-local-government-workforce/

27. American Public Transportation Association. (2023). Transit Workforce Shortage: Synthesis Report. https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Workforce-Shortage-Synthesis-Report-03.2023.pdf

28. Dallas Area Rapid Transit. (2022). FY 2023 Business Plan. See page 300. https://dartorgcmsblob.dart.org/prod/docs/default-source/marketing/financialdocuments/business-plan/dart-fy-2023-business-plan-(1).pdf

29. Tech Talent Project, https://techtalentproject.org/

30. US Digital Response, https://www.usdigitalresponse.org/

31. Digital Service Network, https://www.digitalservicenetwork.org/

32. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022, November). Projections overview and highlights, 2021-31. Monthly Labor Review. https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2022/article/projections-overview-and-highlights-2021-31.htm

33. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, May 18). Foreign-Born Workers: Labor Force Characteristics – 2022. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf

34. Kahaner, Larry. (2017, June 11). Immigrant truck drivers: Shhh. We don't talk about it. Fleet Owner. https://www.fleetowner.com/operations/drivers/article/21696194/immigrant-truck-drivers-shhhh-we-dont-talk-about-it

35. American Public Transportation Association. (2023). Transit Workforce Shortage: Synthesis Report. https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Workforce-Shortage-Synthesis-Report-03.2023.pdf

36. The MBTA had a 13% attrition rate for FY23, an increase from previous years. Stout, Matt. (2023, June 26). More and more T workers are leaving, thwarting agency efforts to staff up, officials say. The Boston Globe. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/06/26/metro/more-more-t-workers-are-leaving-thwarting-agency-efforts-staff-up-officials-say/

37. American Public Transportation Association. (2023). Transit Workforce Shortage: Synthesis Report. https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-Workforce-Shortage-Synthesis-Report-03.2023.pdf

38. Noland, R., DiPetrillo, S., & Lubin, A. (2021). Identifying Current and Future Training Needs of the Public Transportation Industry. Federal Transit Administration Report 0191. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-06/FTA-Report-No-0191.pdf

39. Chicago Transit Authority. (2021). President's 2022 Budget Recommendations. https://www.transitchicago.com/assets/1/6/FY22_Budget_Book_-_Final_(for_website).pdf

40. Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority. (2022). Adopted Budget: July 1, 2022- June 20, 2023. https://www.dropbox.com/s/29aqhg0w1lci1az/FY23%20Adopted%20Budget.pdf?raw=1

41. Noland, R., DiPetrillo, S., & Lubin, A. (2021). Identifying Current and Future Training Needs of the Public Transportation Industry. Federal Transit Administration Report 0191. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-06/FTA-Report-No-0191.pdf

42. Noland, R., DiPetrillo, S., & Lubin, A. (2021). Identifying Current and Future Training Needs of the Public Transportation Industry. Federal Transit Administration Report 0191. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-06/FTA-Report-No-0191.pdf

43. Transit Workforce Center. (2023). Transit Mentorship Metrics: Positive Signs for Retention, Attendance, and Additional Outcomes. https://www.transitworkforce.org/resource_library/transit-operator-mentoring-fact-sheet/

44. Humphrey, Nicole. (2022). Racialized Emotional Labor: An Unseen Burden in the Public Sector. Administration & Society, 54(4), 741–758. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00953997211037583

45. Gallo, Amy. (2023, February 15). What is Psychological Safety? Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2023/02/what-is-psychological-safety

46. Miller, A., Trochmann, M., & Drury, I. (2022). Trauma-Informed Public Management: A Step Toward Addressing Hidden Inequalities and Improving Employee Wellbeing. Public Administration Quarterly. 46(3), 238-257. https://www.proquest.com/openview/080579c1e20d54bce7a7578b8ea750ee/1.pdf

47. Noland, R., DiPetrillo, S., & Lubin, A. (2021). Identifying Current and Future Training Needs of the Public Transportation Industry. Federal Transit Administration Report 0191. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-06/FTA-Report-No-0191.pdf

48. Watt, Ed. (2023). How Neutral Third-Party Intervention Can Improve Retention in the Transit Industry. Mineta Transportation Institute. https://transweb.sjsu.edu/sites/default/files/2252-Watt-Retention-Transit-Industry.pdf

49. U.S. Postal Service. What is REDRESS?, accessed July 16, 2023. https://about.usps.com/who/legal/redress/programs.htm