



Retaining a Diverse and Skilled Workforce: Lessons Learned from the Southern Plains Transportation Center

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This short working group presentation will answer the question on what business models and tools are needed to sustainably support workforce needs. Specifically, it will explore the efforts by the Southern Plains Transportation Center (SPTC), a US DOT Region 6 transportation center, in its outreach efforts to schools, tribal nations, local communities, and state DOTs to engage in workforce development activities.

Within the five states that make up the SPTC consortium, there are several key issues impacting workforce development, namely aging workforce, loss of institutional knowledge, younger workers dissatisfied with current opportunities, limited resources (smaller state vs. bigger state and rural vs urban), job hopping commonplace and lack of employment opportunities and/or awareness across potential stakeholders. A large portion of the workforce, especially within the public sector, are aging out and approaching retirement. When they do retire, they take all the institutional knowledge they've built up over the years with them, and it is oftentimes years before a new employee can even approach the level of productivity of that retired worker. Exit interviews often are not comprehensive enough to capture this knowledge, and lessons learned documentation for projects are often sparse. Also, employees are often met with a disappointing work culture, a lack of work-life balance, and rigid standards with a lack of competitive pay, especially within the public sector. It would be difficult to retain an employee for an agency that has few benefits and maintains a strict culture, versus a private sector job that offers more flexible options. Many times, this is up to the resources within that organization. Smaller states, all the way down to rural municipalities, will have a lack of resources compared to their larger more well-funded counterparts in bigger cities and bigger states. There is a strong pull away from these locations as workers rarely stay in their hometown, pursuing better opportunities elsewhere. While an individual may receive an excellent education, they will rarely stay in their rural hometown, exacerbating a drain of many lower-income areas.

In recent years, SPTC has taken a strategic approach to bring together academia, and the private and public sector to build a transportation workforce pipeline by introducing STEM and transportation careers to K-12 students as well as supporting a large set of stakeholders with dedicated opportunities for career development. Efforts include outreach engagements, summer internships, training courses, STEM camps, development of training materials, residential programs, workshops, conferences, and more.

Through SPTC's workforce development activities, it was realized that identifying stakeholders and their needs is the most important part of any project. This can be done by



informal surveys, but it is far better to meet in person. Traveling to where your stakeholders are, no matter how far away, and discussing matters that are important to them are key to getting buy-in and forming those necessary relationships between groups. As an example, historically, it has been very difficult for outside groups to form relationships with tribal entities. The tribes are rightfully suspicious of outside groups coming in dictating solutions to them. It's far more important to engage with a spirit of respect and of listening. This year, after a series of onsite visits with the Citizen Potawatomi Nation's workforce development and education coordinators, SPTC planned a series of potential internship opportunities, as well as tours of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation and the University of Oklahoma for the tribe's after school program of K-12 students. Also, SPTC has understood the importance of serving as a bridge or facilitator between groups and helped form meaningful partnerships between different groups within USDOT Region 6.

Another lesson learned was to seek opportunities and partnerships everywhere. Transportation touches every area of our lives. It makes sense that partnerships could be formed in countless interdisciplinary areas as well. For example, SPTC partners with the Oklahoma Transportation Library to provide library services, study materials, facilitate workshops, and other educational opportunities for students in the transportation field. Similarly, partnering with local construction firms, asphalt and materials related organizations, and other transportation stakeholders across the spectrum would help with the workforce development activities. But also think about other areas to partner in. Historians, cultural resources personnel, political offices, economic specialists, graphic designers, city and country officials, and more, are all stakeholders in transportation, and can make valuable educational contributions to help introduce transportation concepts to students everywhere.

Retaining talent in the transportation field, especially in the public sector, is a major challenge. While salary plays a role, a strong organizational culture can significantly influence retention by creating a positive, supportive work environment. A key strategy for improving culture and retention is effective knowledge management. This ensures employees have quick access to the information they need, which boosts productivity and reduces frustration. SPTC began the development of knowledge management infrastructure with training materials and a resources library to assist organizations in cataloging the invaluable expertise of transportation professionals, helping workers find information more efficiently, improving the agility and economic competitiveness of their respective organizations.

In conclusion, this presentation will equip attendees with practical tools and actionable techniques to begin implementing the strategies discussed. By exploring real-world examples, both successful and challenging, participants will gain valuable insights into what works, what doesn't, and how to adapt these approaches to fit their own organizational needs.

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