Transit Workforce Metrics: Measuring Outcomes and Progress

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While the transit industry has already developed processes for tracking service and performance metrics, the practice of tracking workforce metrics, which can also highlight successes and opportunities for improvement, is less common and remains relatively new for many workforce development initiatives. The Transit Workforce Center (TWC), an FTA-funded national technical assistance center for transit workforce development, has heard extensive anecdotal evidence of the success of such programs, such as mentorship, but measuring outcomes can provide further insight and more benefits. Tracking metrics can give agencies more information, such as what workforce efforts are having the greatest impact, what statistics are improving over time, and how the agency's workforce performs relative to its peers. With key performance indicators, mid-level management can get buy-in for continuing or establishing new workforce initiatives. This brief presents examples of how agencies might track workforce metrics and what those metrics can indicate across a few key areas.

Recruitment is one area where tracking metrics can provide helpful insights. For any recruitment activity, there is a certain level of investment of time or money, like conducting outreach with partners or paying for ad space. If a transit agency is investing in several recruitment sources, at a baseline level, managers may want to know the number of candidates each effort yields. Going a bit further, an agency can also trace each effort to determine which method is bringing in the best performers and whether that warrants additional investment in that channel. Through analyzing applicant data, Metro Transit in Minneapolis, MN found that employee referrals and bus advertisements were the top sources of successful candidates, which could prompt more effort and funding towards those methods.

In reviewing applicant data, Metro Transit also analyzed hiring time. Analysts found that the human resources department reviews applications fairly quickly, but applicants often still have to wait a long time, about three months, before being hired, which caused a large portion to give up or nearly give up. This finding could prompt improvements to streamline the hiring process and decrease time-to-hire.

Many transit agencies are facing retention and workforce shortage challenges; tracking retention can help identify sore points and assess whether workforce initiatives or policy changes are having any effects. At Metro Transit, during a strong recruitment effort of bus operators, data analysts monitored 12-month retention of bus operators as well as other roles. This statistic for operators was comparable to other job functions at Metro Transit and state averages reflected in the Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, looking more granularly, analysts found that 12-month retention of first-year bus operators was much lower than second-year-plus operators, meaning that most turnover was happening earlier on in a bus operator's career. After making training improvements, the first-year retention for 2024 has improved over 2023.

In the case of mentorship, metrics can show how the program has immediately improved worker outcomes. In TWC's mentorship metrics fact sheet, we highlight some early metrics from several transit agencies that indicate the effectiveness of mentoring programs. At Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit) and Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), retention rates of operators were higher after the mentoring program began than before. At Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA), mentorship program leads were able to simultaneously track metrics for operators with a mentor versus operators without a mentor and found a much higher retention rate (82 percent) among operators with a mentor compared to those without (56 percent). GCRTA also saw fewer absences among mentored operators by about 34 percent.

Another way transit agencies might use data is to track the success/progression of workers during their time at the organization, i.e., their career pathways. How people tend to progress, how quickly they are promoted, where they end up after a certain amount of time, etc. can be valuable information internally but also to share with candidates during recruitment processes; people may find a role more attractive if they can see themselves growing in the organization.

Metrics can be taken a step further to measure the effects of programs on service outcomes. In the Metrics of Success Report, produced by the International Transportation Learning Center (which operates TWC), ITLC analyzed the mean distance between failures (MDBF) at Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) garages before and after the initiation of a new training program. A lower MDBF suggests that there are bus failures requiring some sort of maintenance more often than a higher MDBF, which would, on the other hand, indicate more successful preventative maintenance. At SEPTA, MDBF was higher, showing better preventative maintenance, for every month post-training in comparison to the year before.

There are a number of challenges agencies might face in tracking workforce metrics and a number of ways to address those difficulties. One potential challenge is that the siloed nature of departments within agencies can make it difficult for people to access workforce data, but having a dedicated staff member (e.g., a data analyst) who can access sources and produce a dashboard or some collection of shareable metrics would enable more people to view key performance indicators and to conduct analyses. Another challenge might be limited staff at smaller agencies, which means there isn't always someone dedicated to data or tracking metrics; technical assistance centers, like TWC or the National Center for Applied Transit Technology (N-CATT), can help. Even without a dedicated staff member, managers of workforce programs can still track meaningful metrics today to demonstrate impact. Lastly, differences in how agencies track the same statistics can impede future benchmarking against peers, but having standardization or communication across the industry can help alleviate some of the variability. Agencies may face other unique challenges and will likely have their own solutions that work for them.

Contact us for technical assistance or to share about your workforce data tracking efforts: twc@transportcenter.org