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How technology can empower operators with better work-life balance

The public transit industry is transforming, focusing on improving work conditions to retain and attract operators. Technology plays a crucial role in that matter by leveraging scheduling strategies to create better scheduling, offer flexible hours, and innovate with personalized rostering.

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The public transit industry is looking ahead at a major transformation. As experienced drivers have begun to retire, recruitment of new talent presents challenges as well as new opportunities for fresh perspectives and innovative ideas. By improving work conditions, we can welcome new operators and open the door to making these roles more attractive compared to other job opportunities in our communities.

Today's workforce is increasingly prioritizing a healthy work-life balance and greater flexibility, and the public transit workforce is no exception. Everyone wants to feel valued and equipped for success. Though it may sound costly for agencies, effective solutions that balance operator satisfaction and financial impacts are available – offering cost-neutral or even cost-saving solutions. By rethinking how agencies distribute work, we can empower operators to connect riders to vital economic and social opportunities within our communities, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic environment for all.

Challenges in Transit Employment: Insights from Current and Former Workers

Extensive research in North America reveals that five of the eight main factors discouraging new workers from applying to transit agencies are related to work schedules and scheduling practices.

When surveyed, hundreds of current and former transit workers agreed these were the primary challenges – and several common themes emerged:

1. Nearly half of the respondents cited compensation-related reasons, including pay and benefits.
2. Similarly, many respondents noted issues with inflexible work schedules, long shifts, and feeling overworked.
3. About 20% of respondents mentioned customer-related issues, such as physical and verbal abuse from passengers.

Other common factors of concern include safety and security issues, hiring and training challenges, poor communication and transparency from management, and a culture of non-support and lack of respect from management.

Quick Win: Developing Better Work Schedules

While work schedules can be challenging for drivers, there are many opportunities to make improvements. Identifying which schedule parameters are most stressful for your drivers is a great first step:

- Are the breaks too short?
- Are the layovers unrealistic?
- Are there adequate facilities at the layover points?

Engaging these discussions with your operators, analyzing performance data, and building scenarios for adjusting work schedules can lead to significant improvements.

Scenarios are used to test and evaluate improvements to work conditions. You might increase the number of *straight runs*, where operators work full days without the need for unpaid breaks between routes. Or reduce *street reliefs*, where operators board a bus from the street to take over driving a route.

The next step is to estimate costs and make informed decisions on what's acceptable for operators, and also cost effective. Understanding parameter changes by time of day, and day of the week, is crucial for determining which adjustments have the most positive impact on your operators' work schedules and stress levels. The results of this process are incredibly rewarding, and it's well worth the effort to carry out this type of analysis of your operators' needs.

Metro Transit in Minneapolis, MN, serves as an inspiring example of how proactive measures can lead to remarkable improvements. Facing a decline in driver numbers, Metro Transit embarked on a comprehensive process to enhance their scheduling system. Shaun Morrell, Manager of Scheduling and Systems Support at Metro Transit, proudly shared: “We have made significant improvements in our production of bus schedules by using the advanced HASTUS scheduling tools. (...) We have improved run quality by reducing split work, increasing 8-hour runs, and drastically reducing street reliefs (...)”. Thanks to their dedicated efforts, the Twin Cities' public transport provider achieved a 14% increase in straight runs, a reduction in split runs and trips with insufficient layover, and a 50% reduction in street relief.

By prioritizing the well-being of their drivers and creating more driver-friendly schedules with realistic layovers, feasible runtimes, and adequate breaks, Metro Transit has significantly enhanced the driver work experience and set the bar for the industry.

Transformative Win: Offering Flexible Work Hours

A transformation has been underway in recent years with regards to the expectations of workers. We all seek more flexibility, and many recruits want more than a 5-day a week, 8-hour a day job.

Thankfully, today's optimization solutions make it feasible for agencies to offer flexible shifts without compromising overall operating performance.

Advancements in technology have allowed transit agencies to meet labor market demands by opening-up new ways to package runs and offer operators flexible scheduling options to choose from, including:

- **4 ½ day schedule:** 4 x 9hrs + 1 x 4hrs = 40 hrs/week
- **4-day schedule:** 4 x 10hrs = 40 hrs/week
- **3 days and 2 half day schedules:** 3 x 10hrs + 2 x 5hrs = 40 hrs/week

What can be particularly appealing is that flexible work hours can also mean more days off per week for drivers.

IndyGo in Indianapolis, IN has been a pioneer in this matter. "Between 2020 and 2023, we adopted innovative scheduling and bidding strategies aimed at enhancing the quality of life for our operators. Key factors contributing to our success included close collaboration between the union and management, active engagement of operators, and ongoing efforts to address issues and seek improvements." said Aaron Vogel, COO, at IndyGo. They gradually implemented 4/10 work schedule and guaranteed consecutive days off while transitioning to rostering and web bidding.

By offering flexible shifts, transit agencies help their operators to balance work and personal commitments.

Long-term Win: Lead the Way with Rostering Choices

Flexibility can also be applied to the type of services drivers operate. Seniority impacts which service operators get, often resulting in younger drivers getting weekend and late-night services, and that is a major barrier to recruiting new operators. Some of our clients in the US have implemented AM and PM roster choices. Operators decide if they are AM or PM drivers, so they bid only on their chosen roster – they're not required to work PM rosters, if they chose AM. This offers new operators more control over how their job impacts their personal lives, whether that means family, relationships, or hobbies. This is a first step.

In Europe, agencies are taking even more advantage of new technology options. Public transit providers are moving towards a personalized work rostering approach to tackle workforce shortages and recruitment challenges. Personalized work rostering tailors work schedules to fit individual employee preferences, improving job satisfaction and work-life balance. It involves:

- **Flexibility:** Employees can choose shifts and plan time off.

- Employee involvement: Operators have input in their schedules.
- Efficiency: Advanced tools create reliable schedules that meet both employee and operational needs.

De Lijn in Belgium introduced this approach several years ago through a proof of concept, engaging unions in the discussion. Then they expanded the new rostering model to the entire agency. They've seen outstanding results in terms of driver's satisfaction and recruitment. Why? Because with this approach operators are actively involved in their own scheduling. They can choose specific duties or categories, days off and can veto specific cases that won't work for them. This approach also brings more transparency and trust to the scheduling process.

Providing rostering choices is a significant but challenging win. Of course, it won't happen overnight. Many stakeholders must come together to agree on the desired outcome and the means to achieve it. Agencies need to be well-equipped technology-wise. Scheduling tools based on advanced optimization algorithms are invaluable, as they can handle flexible duty scheduling in combination with union-agreed work rules and operational constraints.

Over the past year, we have been collaborating with the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), unions, transit providers, technology providers and consultants to tackle the critical challenges highlighted in this article. The workgroup's initial paper on scheduling practices, available [here](#), lays the groundwork for transformative change. The next step is to unite even more stakeholders to prove that, through collective effort, we can revolutionize our industry. By working together, we can create an environment that not only attracts operators but also enhances their quality of life, offers flexibility, and provides a future they can be proud of. Let's join forces to lead this change, empowering operators to drive forward — our local economies and ensuring a thriving transit industry for years to come.