

Passing on the Legacy:

The Benefits of Mentoring in Transit Training

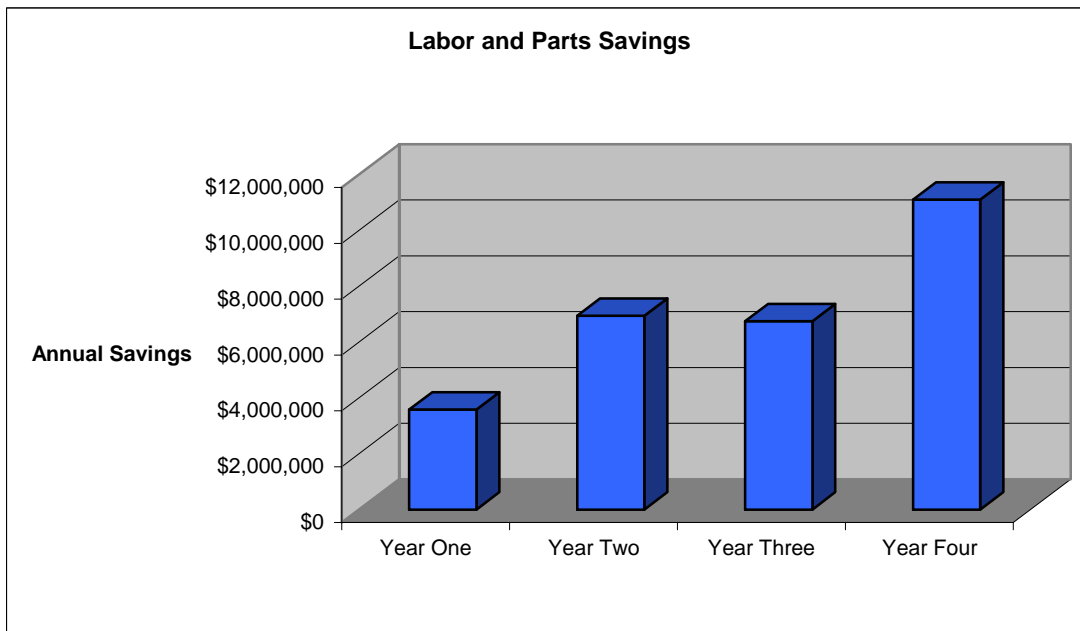


Transportation Learning Center
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Introduction

Training investments yield benefits for transit agencies, workers and users of public transportation. The Transportation Learning Center’s research report series *Measuring Up*, a case study of data-driven, labor-management training partnerships in Pennsylvania, revealed that training yields enormous returns-on-investment. For the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), estimated returns on training investments ranged from 142 percent and 442 percent with a bottom line savings from \$6,356,977 to \$14,219,887. These savings represent the cumulative effect of improved equipment reliability, reduction in unnecessary part replacement, improved labor efficiency and a reduced need for spare buses. Further savings will accrue to SEPTA as these better-trained mechanics continue to work smarter and more efficiently into the future. Mentoring played a significant part in these savings.

Chart One: Total Labor and Parts Savings in Bus Maintenance/Repair Increases with the Worker Training



Major gains also came with an increasing number of passing scores on practical “hands-on” examinations. Before the Keystone labor-management cooperative training partnership, 53 percent of the bus mechanics received a passing grade after their training. After implementing Keystone, 84 percent achieved passing scores. Side-by-side mentoring from experienced workers is crucial to this success. This paper explores the positive impact of mentoring for apprentices, unions and transit systems through a review of conclusions drawn by the training community and a case-study analysis of three transit agencies.

The Crucial Role of Mentoring in Training Success

Traditionally, mentoring describes when a person (the mentor) teaches another person (the mentee) how to do a job more effectively, safely and/or to progress in their career. For the purposes of this report, a mentor is defined as a journey worker who passes on the skills of a craft to a new worker and teaches the new worker about workplace norms, employer and union rules and procedures.

Mentors play a considerable role in the success of apprenticeship and training programs. The importance of a solid mentoring plan cannot be overemphasized. Mentoring programs provide guidance for apprentices/trainees (hereinafter trainees), enhance the employment experience for both trainees and mentors, profit the employer the union at an organized employer.¹ Mentors ensure that trainees conduct their work properly, have a good attitude, feel good about their accomplishments and make steady progress toward their learning objectives.

A mentor can teach trainees about both good and bad habits in the tradecraft and general workplace behavior. Therefore, it is critical that the right journey workers become mentors. Choosing mentors through a joint committee, including the union and employer, is an effective way to implement a solid mentoring program. Employee training committee representatives have a grasp of which workers are responsible, hard working and knowledgeable.

SEPTA and Transport Workers Union Local 234 (TWU-24) experienced the negative impact of poor mentoring. At the beginning of their Maintenance Custodian and Maintenance Custodian Driver (MC/MCD) training program, mentors helped trainees with on-the-job learning (OJL). Unfortunately, some mentors inappropriately taught trainees how to “beat the system” by sharing cleaning short cuts, safety short cuts and other undesirable work place behaviors. These “depot lawyers” misinformed employees of workplace rules and collective bargaining issues; in general, they “tainted”² trainees. SEPTA and TWU-234 learned from this process by more carefully choosing mentors from a pool of employees who best exemplify proper safety, craft and workplace behavior. Since remedying this roadblock, the MC/MCD mentoring program has benefited the trainees, SEPTA and TWU-234.

Financial Gains for Unions, Transit Authorities and Workers

Good mentors help reduce the number of grievances and disciplinary actions, saving the union considerable time and money. Many union leaders willingly state that, “A bad employee is a bad union member,” and union members understand that their welfare depends on the success of their employer.

¹ In the U.S. transit industry, over 90 percent of hourly operations employees are represented by unions.

² A term used by both labor and management at SEPTA.

Like the local union, the employer saves time and money from a decrease in the number of discipline hearings and grievance handlings. For the employer though, good mentoring extends further. Transit systems are dangerous places to work. Employees must be aware of hazards in their jobs and the dangers of moving transit vehicles and electrical power sources such as third rails. Additionally, maintenance cleaners face exposure to bio-hazardous materials and chemicals. Awareness of these risks requires classroom instruction in addition to on the job guidance. A good mentor teaches their trainees about workplace safety.

Employers are vulnerable to legal actions from both injured employees and patrons. Good mentoring helps reduce injuries and the employer's exposure to liability. Concurrently, there is a decrease in lost time and worker compensation claims. As role models, mentors are compelled to set a strong example and improve their behavior and skills. Mentored workers are also more productive earlier in their careers. Conceptualizing transit jobs as "careers" is crucial to the success of mentoring. The final benefit for employers is the reduction in turnover that occurs when new hires receive good training.

Trainees with active mentors feel more positively about their jobs in general and are more likely to stay with an employer. Good training and mentoring instills a sense of loyalty to the employer and the union in joint programs. It provides the union an opportunity to convey to trainees aspects of the workplace that might otherwise be ignored. An example provided by TWU-234 is the somewhat complex absenteeism point system at SEPTA. The system is a progressive discipline scheme that assigns points (like demerits) for a variety of unexcused absences. Briefly, when a certain number of points are reached, disciplinary action occurs. It could be a day without pay for the first infraction, five days for the second and dismissal for the third. In the meantime, points are deducted from the cumulative total after disciplinary action is taken giving the employee another chance. For an employee new to the workplace, this can be confusing. The mentor is the most likely individual in the new hire's work life to explain patiently this and the need for a good work ethic. Unions want good employees as their members and it is to their advantage to have a stable workforce that respects workplace rules. Mentors help trainees understand those expectations.

Three Transit Properties/Three Mentoring Experiences

After a review of several public transportation training programs throughout the nation, the Center concludes that mentoring programs at transit properties generally follow one of three paths:

- Informal
- Formal but limited in scope and number of mentors
- Formal with training and large numbers of mentors

Informal Mentoring

Portland, Oregon's TriMet System has no formal mentoring program. Experienced workers advise and guide apprentices about their job craft. Though "informal," these more experienced workers play the role of mentors. The informal mentors receive training as part of the apprenticeship program. Apprentices rotate to specialists who provide advanced training on specific components. TriMet's aim, given budget restrictions, is to re-engineer its training to be outcome-based with continuous improvement. In doing so, they implemented an intensive training regimen that accomplishes more in a shorter time than traditional apprenticeship schedules. TriMet has focused on developing tighter scripting for lesson plans and coordinating on-the-floor learning. Trainings on how people learn and how to teach have been expanded for trainers. TriMet's comprehensive view of training incorporates apprentices in parts of the training plan, including developing lesson plans. While on the floor, apprentices and specialists interact and assume one another's roles. Apprentices may be asked to perform a repair and explain, as though teaching, what they are doing and why. This helps develop a cadre of workers who are familiar with and ready to take on the task of training and mentoring as they develop in their careers.

Formal Mentoring Programs of Limited Scope

The Alameda Contra-Costa Transit District (AC Transit) adopted a formal but limited approach to mentoring. Apprentices do not receive individual mentors. The Joint Apprenticeship Committee (JAC) appoints one full-time Apprenticeship Mentor to oversee all apprentices at the agency. Acting as a liaison between apprentices and the JAC, the Apprenticeship Mentor performs a number of important functions. Foremost is monitoring the apprentices' progress and addressing concerns about the program—whether in the form of grievances, questions or general advice. The Apprenticeship Mentor coordinates class logistics and represents the training department at JAC meetings. On-the-job learning at AC Transit requires apprentices to work in close proximity to senior mechanics. The informal (and traditional) mentoring functions as an important part of AC Transit's training. AC Transit typically trains journey workers on new equipment or techniques and relies on them to take that learning back to the shop floor and the apprentices. Additionally, there are six trainers from the union's ranks and they informally help apprentices as mentors.

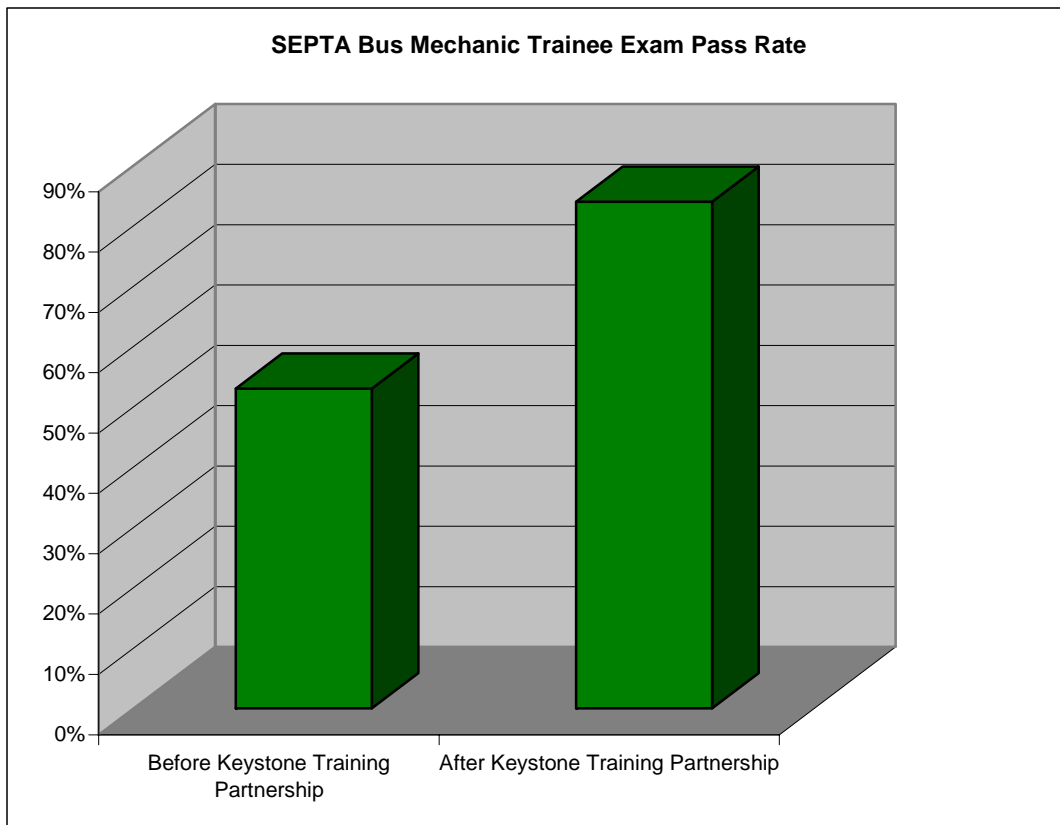
Formal Mentoring with Mentor Training

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) has a formal mentoring program that incorporates mentor training. Mentors are chosen by both TWU-234 and SEPTA. SEPTA learned from its early Maintenance Custodian/Maintenance Custodian Driver program and developed a formal and joint method for choosing mentors. Early mentors were not prepared for their responsibilities and were not necessarily the best role models for new employees. That experience convinced the joint training committee to exercise in the mentor selection process.

Not recognizing the need for program changes led to the failure of prior bus mechanic training. A key element in that failure was the practice of sending recently trained mechanics to the shop floor without any support. Either they were left on their own to pick up what knowledge they could or they were assigned back to their original post fueling buses. This happened because front-line supervisors focused intently on getting buses out the door and onto their routes, referred to as “making the line.” Trainees had no chance to apply their training while it was still fresh in their minds. Second, several weeks or even months often passed before the trainee was tested on the material. Combining the passage of time and the lack of practical application resulted in low test scores with only 53 percent passing. SEPTA saw that the system wasted valuable training and deprived the agency of a future workforce.

The TWU-234 and SEPTA partnership assigns trainees a mentor immediately following training. Trainees practice in the shop what they learned in the classroom and they are tested within 60 days. Since these changes, test scores rose to an 84 percent passing rate. Other factors come into play in the positive and negatives of this story, but none is more important than mentoring and a structured support system.

Chart 1: SEPTA Bus Mechanic Trainee Practical Exam Passage Rate Improves Dramatically After Keystone



In the SEPTA/TWU-234 partnership, experienced mechanics bid for mentor positions through a union process. Selection is based on expert mechanical knowledge and on an ability to communicate well. Management maintains the right to veto inappropriate candidates, but they rarely use that veto. Trained mentors are responsible for ensuring that recent training graduates practice their newly learned skills. Mentors demonstrate how tasks are properly done, and teach this to trainees. By using the training department's existing system for documenting work and training, mentors verify trainees' accomplishments and progress.

Highlights of the program include program coordination among the various participants, a step-by-step outline of each team member's responsibilities, desired outcomes and establishment of communications channels for feedback and follow-up.

Though the mentor program is evolving, their process illustrates how a comprehensive mentoring plan can serve as a best practice guideline. The mentoring program will soon be implemented in other departments as SEPTA and TWU-234 begin to introduce several new apprenticeship programs. Key to a thorough mentoring program is the joint determination of mentor selection and agreement on the elements of mentor training, task assignment and performance. Coordination among supervisors, the training department, union partnership staff, trainees and mentors is critical. The trainees' success demands a clear strategy for each team member to follow.

SEPTA Mentor Requirements

1. TWU-234 Membership
2. Demonstrated Safe Work History
3. Qualified in Job Craft
4. Commitment to Training Program
5. Attend a Mentor Orientation

One of the great success stories in public transportation also comes from the Keystone Transit Career Ladder Partnership in which SEPTA and TWU-234 participate. It is documented in a well-published research study by the Transportation Learning Center, Metrics of Success, which can be found at <http://www.transportcenter.org/>.

Conclusion

Attention to detail, project planning and careful integration of a mentoring plan into training programs helps ensure success. The Transportation Learning Center researched mentoring web sites, interviewed practitioners and reviewed mentoring practices in other industries. The results of these efforts lead us to the conclusion that apprenticeship and training schemes should include a comprehensive and well-planned mentoring program. It is important to note that the Transportation Learning Center does not endorse any particular mentoring scheme; rather, it emphasizes the importance of having a plan. Different and workable training and mentoring programs will evolve at transit agencies based on the environment, budget and need. As part of the Center's on-going work in transit training, it will continue to gather and disseminate information on best practices to the transit industry training constituents.