

Building Capacity for Transit Training: International and Domestic Comparisons



Working Paper-December 2008

 **TRANSPORTATION LEARNING CENTER**

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Executive Summary

As the US public transportation industry continues to make strides toward more effective workforce development systems to address pervasive skills challenges, an important opportunity exists to identify useful lessons from the most effective industry-wide training programs in other countries and other US industries. The “Best in Class” among these other industry-wide training systems share a number of common features that contribute to their quality and effectiveness. These common features include industry-wide and local training partnerships, data-driven curriculum and courseware development, high quality integrated delivery of classroom and on-the-job training and certification, and secure sources of adequate funding. Understanding these distinctive features of successful industry-wide training systems in other countries and industries can contribute to enhancing workforce training in this country as part of ongoing innovations in transit workforce development.

This working paper provides an initial overview of the findings from ongoing research at the Transportation Learning Center² regarding strong industry-wide workforce development systems in six other countries and in several US industries. Its focus is on training systems for blue collar employees whose counterparts in the United States generally receive less investment in developing their knowledge, skills and abilities. It identifies key features that could be adapted for use within an emerging system of more effective US transit training. Detailed comparisons with training systems of other countries and other US industries will be published by the Center in 2009.

Introduction

The transit industry and its workforce development systems find themselves at an historic crossroads as the calendar turns to 2009. The industry is facing the challenges of an aging workforce and a smaller, more diverse population for recruitment, global warming, oil dependency, and economic meltdown and recovery with an opportunity to creatively address its long-brewing skills crisis.

The principal drivers of public transportation’s skills crisis include:

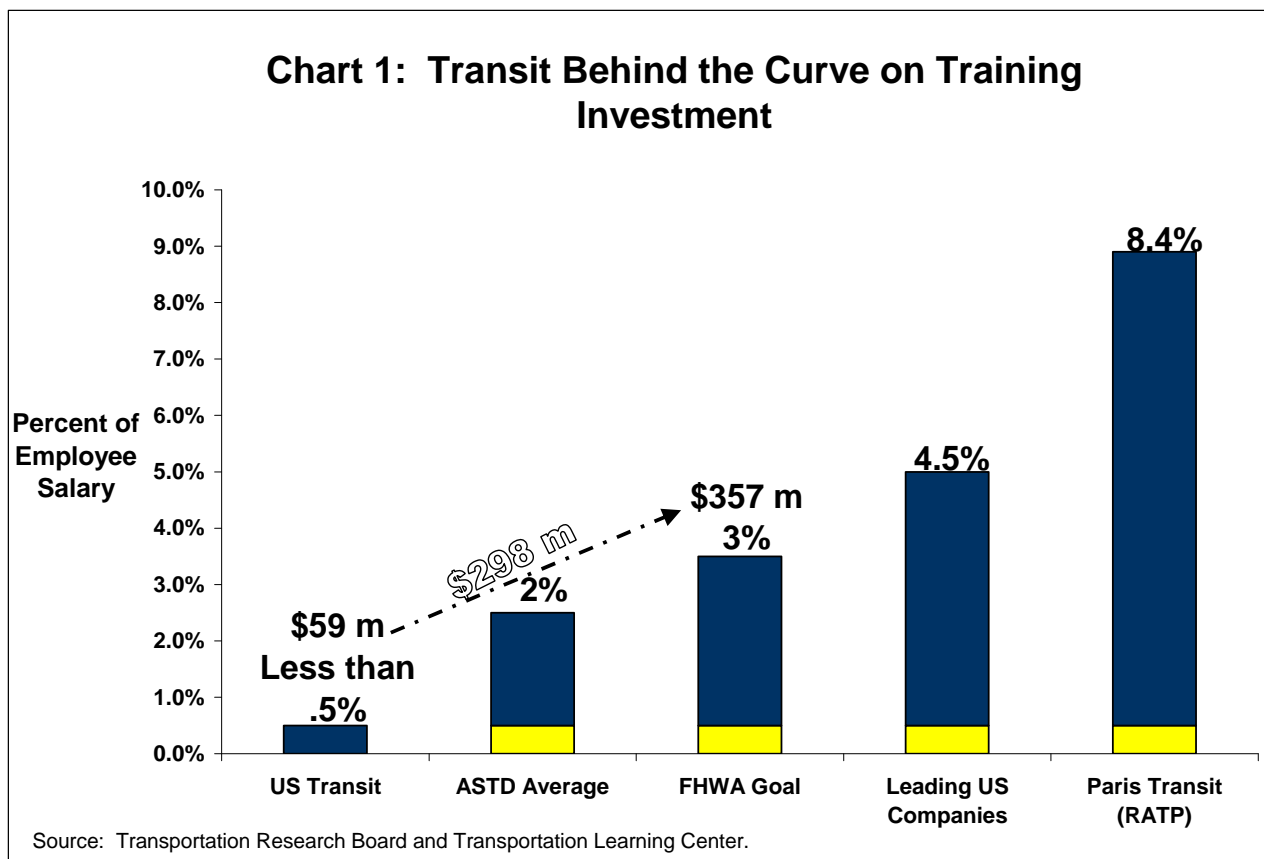
- Rapidly changing technology, as digital, electronic and telecommunications-based systems and new energy-efficient propulsion systems are becoming pervasive.
- Pending retirement, with 40 percent of skilled technical workers reaching retirement age in the next five years. A limited national

investment in education and training opportunities for Americans not headed to four-year colleges heightens the challenge.

- Record increases in transit ridership, more than 25 percent nationally since 1995, with more future growth predicted.

The transit industry's ability to respond to these challenges has been hampered by limited training capacity, low investment in the human capital needed to support the industry's enormous investments in the physical capital of buses, trains and infrastructure, the local focus of transit systems and unions, and a failure to consistently collaborate nationally on issues of joint concern to management and labor.

In spite of these clear challenges, transit continues to dramatically under-invest in workforce development, with less than ½ of one percent of industry payroll going to workforce training – far lower than found in other benchmark industries in the US and in other countries. Transit's training investment is far below the 2 percent of payroll invested by other US industries, the 3 percent goal set by the Federal Highway Administration, and the 8.4 percent payroll invested by the Paris regional transit system (though the Paris system is clearly not the whole French industry). The US industry is spending less than \$59 million annually on training – a number that would need to rise to by \$298 million to reach the FHWA goal of 3 percent of payroll - \$357 million for transit training.



In addition to low levels of financial investment in human capital, there has historically been no collective approach to workforce training in the industry. By not having the opportunity to rely on an industry-focused system of training, leaders of individual transit systems and local unions have had to determine for themselves, on their own, the kind of training needed. In most cases they develop courseware and deliver that training in the context of their own individual properties. With each local organization conceiving, designing, engineering and manufacturing its own wheel, the industry's training "system" is highly inefficient and expensive. It entails considerable cost for those systems willing to take on the effort. In the absence of a system of national curriculum, shared courseware and effective joint standards for certification, local training programs are often quite different from one another, with very different levels of quality.

The good news is that the US transit industry has begun to meet these challenges. A brief historical review can highlight the progress now being made.

After the mid-1990s, with growing recognition of the industry's emerging skills crisis,³ leading national public transportation organizations called for much greater focus on the industry's training needs. Emphasis was placed on joint labor-management approaches to address the workforce challenge.



In 2000 the Board of Directors of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) launched its Workforce Development Initiative (WDI), and the WDI's leaders invited labor representatives to participate in the WDI task force. WDI's report, *Workforce Development: Public Transportation's Blueprint for the 21st Century*, called for much greater focus on the people side of the industry – its human capital – and welcomed opportunities for leaders from transit management and labor to work together in addressing these challenges.

The Amalgamated Transit Union and the Transport Workers Union, the two unions with the largest membership in public transportation, both called for greater training opportunities for their members,

specifically through joint labor-management training partnerships. Working with transit executives, they formed a joint national nonprofit, the Transportation Learning Center, and successfully accessed in-state training funds originating with the US Department of Labor – funding that by federal legislation requires union signoff on training projects involving a union-represented work force.

Since 2000, a series of local and national innovations in transit workforce training have built on this progress, with decisive leadership from key national and local figures in transit labor and management. Supported in part by public investments

from US Departments of Transportation and Labor and the Transportation Research Board, this joint leadership helped launch very positive labor-management training partnerships in a number of states that have:

- Provided new training for thousands of transit workers,
- Moved workers up career ladders as they have enhanced their skills, and
- Saved transit agencies millions of dollars by achieving greater equipment reliability, eliminating unnecessary parts usage, reducing spare equipment requirements, and increasing the efficiency of core maintenance activities⁴ as summarized in *Transit Partnership Training: Metrics of Success*.

Building on the momentum of these new local, regional and statewide training partnerships, transit's joint leadership also sponsored a nationwide partnership among hundreds of transit system union and management representatives to develop jointly supported national training guidelines. As of the end of 2008 national training guidelines have been proposed for five technical maintenance occupations along with a national framework for apprenticeship (see *Working Together: A Systems Approach for Transit Training*, Transportation Learning Center, October 2008). These national resources for the first time provide a system framework for a common training curriculum, objective skill gap analysis, assessment of gaps in available training programs, sharing existing courseware across locations to fill gaps in training capacity, and developing new courseware in areas where no good training materials currently exist.

These recent practical developments provide a good beginning for the broader changes necessary to ensure effective training opportunities for the operations and maintenance work force in the US transit industry. Equally important is the contribution of these new training partnerships to changing and modernizing the culture within transit agencies. Successful partnerships for training have helped support industry leaders in framing the possibility of intentionally building a new culture of cooperation and mutual respect within the transit industry. These leaders of transit labor and management are moving toward transcending the top-down, ultra-hierarchical and long obsolete command-and-control military model in favor of a modern workplace culture based on partnership and joint problem solving. From Philadelphia and the rest of Pennsylvania to Los Angeles, Atlanta, Portland, Louisville and Albany, from Salt Lake City to the San Francisco Bay Area and New York City, transit executives and labor leaders are finding new ways to work together for developing their workforce and modernizing their organizations.

With the newly emerging setting of joint training activities, national training resources and consensus training guidelines, US public transportation leaders can now look realistically, perhaps for the first time ever, at how best to adapt the key features of successful training systems in other countries and industries.