Hiring Productivity for Maintenance Staff

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By gearing the employment process to hire productivity, light rail transit systems can build maintenance staffs that function more efficiently and cost-effectively despite their smaller sizes. To do this, standards must be set for the various maintenance disciplines; candidates must be tested for ability, attitude, and trainability; and cross-training must be provided.

TRANSIT PROPERTIES NEW TO rail system maintenance must develop the ability to achieve a goal of having a qualified, productive work force at the outset of new revenue service.

The difference between a successful productive maintenance team and a mediocre "warm body" work force is hiring people that have the abilities and proper attitudes, and that are trainable to meet the system’s maintenance needs. Accomplishing this task within a unionized transit organization means setting standards within the various maintenance disciplines and specifying how employees are to progress within the maintenance groups. The selection process of maintenance personnel is paramount in establishing the appropriate base for maintenance operations. It is with this selection standard that the number of maintainers required and the tone of the various maintenance disciplines will be set.

If the existing maintenance work force is to be used, prequalifications of these employees must be established early. This will allow senior qualified employees to be selected as opposed to senior employees only.

Involvement in the design and construction of the system will help in determining the disciplines needed to maintain a rail system and specifically

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what areas will need qualified employees during prerevenue operations. This concept will play a big role in the success of a start-up and the productivity of the work force.

If it is known that the maintenance people are to come from the existing bargaining unit, it is important that selection standards be set so that only those workers who are trainable are selected. Trainability means having the proper attitude and ability for the specific maintenance discipline as well as being able to pass an examination to verify the prospective employees' trainability.

Knowing the depth of the maintenance required, the testing must be set at levels consistent with learning and understanding the appropriate maintenance information. This ensures proper and safe maintenance performance within the system. Testing for reading comprehension, math, and sentence structure have been found to be good standards in looking for the right person for the job. In gauging trainability it is also important to evaluate the employees' attitude. Good attitudes foster team effort and enhance maintenance practices.

Employees who can pass the testing phase can be considered prequalified, which gives them a 90 percent chance of successfully completing the required training for the specific maintenance discipline. This same technique can be used when bringing in new employees from the street with, of course, the appropriate background.

When establishing the various disciplines within the maintenance group, it is essential that disciplines not be written so specifically that employees cannot be cross-trained to work in other disciplines if the need arises. A broad and diversified rail maintenance group will greatly enhance the productivity of a work force and keep the maintenance budget within reason. Ideally, the intent of maintenance staffing concepts should be laid out and presented to the bargaining unit executive officers well in advance of the need for personnel. However, it does not mean that this staffing concept could not be implemented at any reasonable time, even with the staff currently in place.

The importance of establishing an apprenticeship program for the various disciplines with the same basic selection process will enhance the ability to have qualified workers when the system needs them. These programs provide a lead time when encountering additional future maintenance responsibilities as well as lower production costs.

The hiring of productive workers creates several advantages: a smaller work force, positive input to the maintenance programs, cost-effectiveness, and a better capacity for cross-training maintenance employees. Union bargaining agreements can make the maintenance work force unnecessarily
large. But the concept of trainable workers allows for flexibility with the smaller work force.

The experience with this concept has, in one known case, accounted for annual savings of approximately $200,000. This figure will be multiplied as the years go by or as the maintenance system responsibilities increase.