



Opening Doors Including People with Disabilities in the Transit Workforce

Courtesy of the National Academies

**JUDY SHANLEY,
SHAYNA GLEASON, AND
PATRICIA GREENFIELD**

Shanley is the national director of Transportation and Mobility and the assistant vice president of Education and Youth Transition at national Easterseals in Chicago, Illinois. Gleason is a research associate and Greenfield is the senior director for Workforce Education at the Transit Workforce Center of the International Transportation Learning Center in Silver Spring, Maryland.

With beverage at hand and headset in place, a person in a wheelchair is set for a productive workday. In the transit sector, people with disabilities have typically been viewed as those to *be* served as riders rather than *to* serve as members of the transit workforce. That perspective is changing, as agencies engage with people with disabilities about accessibility needs that will help them thrive in the workplace.

The transit workforce is expected to grow substantially in coming years and already, more than 90 percent of public transit agencies are struggling to hire individuals for frontline positions (1, 2). In 2022, only 21.3 percent of people with a disability were employed nationally, while 65.4 percent of people without a disability were employed (3). This stark employment disparity suggests that people with disabilities comprise an untapped pool of potential candidates for positions. Partnerships between transit agencies and organizations that connect with and serve people with disabilities can result in powerful and mutually beneficial relationships, as evidenced by the case examples that follow.

Cheerleaders for a diverse transit workforce, particularly those who are focused on people with disabilities—are thrilled that this topic is included in this *TR News* theme issue. It affirms the idea of “nothing about us without us,” a longtime ideal of the Independent Living Movement. This principle envisions

people with disabilities as being at the table in policy and strategy decisions that affect their lives. In the transportation industry, individuals with disabilities should comprise part of a diverse workforce and—using approaches discussed in this article—can be included in recruitment and retention initiatives. The authors offer an overview of strategies gleaned from a literature review, their professional experiences, and interviews with practitioners in the field.

Case Examples

METROWEST REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY, CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

Otoniel Orozco, who had trained in the culinary arts, was surprised to find himself working at—of all places—a transit agency. “I’ve always used public transportation. I could never drive,” says Orozco, who is legally blind. “Somehow, I ended up here. The doors were open, the shot was given, and honestly, it’s been such a great fit.”

Those doors opened because the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority in Central Massachusetts has led a pioneering effort to hire people with a range of disabilities, including individuals who are blind, people who have mobility disabilities, and those with developmental disabilities. People with disabilities comprise 20 percent of MetroWest's workforce across a diverse range of roles. "It really was our benefit," affirms Eva Willens, deputy administrator of MetroWest. "We got some great employees, and we still have them to this day."

Since its inception in 2007, MetroWest has partnered with agencies that include the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, Employment Options, MetroWest Center for Independent Living, the Perkins School for the Blind, and the Carrol Center for the Blind. Orozco, assistant manager of the MetroWest call center, connected with the transit agency through such a partnership. Agency partners also assist MetroWest in understanding what job accommodations employees with disabilities will need and provide support to these employees along the way. Liz Gulachenski, a representative from Employment Options, comments about a person the organization connected with MetroWest: "They treat her well and respect her. She actually hasn't needed us for mental health disability services in a while."

Orozco knows that he and his colleagues with disabilities bring unique qualities to MetroWest: "the real-world experience to be able to relate to the demographic we serve." Jim Nee, the agency's director, agrees that employees with disabilities bring a distinctive value, not only to the jobs they perform within transit but also to their colleagues without disabilities. "There's no amount of training that I could do or pay for that would be even close to the benefit of having a staff [member] who has that real-world experience," Nee adds.

CENTRAL OHIO TRANSIT AUTHORITY, COLUMBUS, OHIO

Similarly, Central Ohio Transit Authority (COTA) in Columbus, Ohio, has

Strategies for Recruiting People with Disabilities

- Develop partnerships with human services organizations.
- Create mentoring and career ladder programs with high schools.
- Participate in disability forums, fairs, and community disability planning.

strengthened its workforce and career pipeline by recognizing the value of accommodating young people with learning disabilities who are participating in its preapprenticeship technician program. While mentoring these young people through a partnership with the Columbus City Schools, COTA realized that some of the participants had diverse ways of learning and had likely been supported in high school through individualized education programs, which focused on their specific needs.

The agency worked to determine what barriers to success might exist, exploring ways to train, ask questions, and build its staff's skills in aligning communication and training content to fit the individual's learning style. "This is just what you do as a good trainer: Recognize that people learn differently," explains Tracy Spikes, COTA's Workforce Development senior program manager.

She also notes that, as they made these adjustments, some of the current technicians realized that they had the same challenges and that these accommodations worked for them, too. Spikes underscored the benefits, emphasizing that, "COTA gets another good employee who—with some special attention—now has the confidence to succeed. This approach provides us with a well-rounded and diverse workforce and helps

us live up to our motto: Moving Every Life Forward."

Reasonable Accommodations

Modifications to a job, work environment, or hiring process to enable access for a person with a disability make these success stories possible. However, transit agencies are not on their own in figuring out how to navigate legally required accommodations for their employees. Agencies, such as the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), provide extensive guidance in this area. In particular, ODEP's Job Accommodation Network provides free, confidential guidance on job accommodations for employers and employees.

Disability accommodations will become all the more important as the transit workforce ages. Among transit and intercity bus drivers, 72 percent are age 45 or older, and the average age of such drivers is more than 10 years older than the average American worker (4). In the United States, about 40 percent of adults aged 65 or older have a disability, compared with only 26 percent of all adults (5). Evidence suggests that many people who have age-related disabilities do not think of themselves as disabled (6). These employees may be less likely to know their rights to reasonable accommodations or think to ask for them. Their disabilities can also be invisible and therefore go unperceived by the employer, until they are disclosed.

Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority in Massachusetts has strengthened its workforce by actively reaching out to older adults in its recruitment efforts. The agency also proactively recognizes that retaining excellent employees may require appropriate accommodations, which includes allowing time for additional medical appointments (7). Such awareness and anticipation of disability accommodations will benefit transit agencies in the short and long run.

Performance Measurement

It is not sufficient for an agency or organization to implement recruitment or retention strategies without measuring outcomes. Hiring administrators must continuously evaluate these practices to determine if the strategies are achieving the desired results. It is easy to count outputs related to hiring, such as the numbers of employees with disabilities in the workplace, or the number of contacts or relationships with disability-focused hiring organizations. However, it is more difficult to measure the outcomes of having a diverse workforce that includes people with disabilities. The following are examples of outputs related to people with disabilities in the workforce:

- Increase in the number of people with disabilities in the work setting;
- Increase in career advancement opportunities;
- Increase in the number of people with disabilities in work teams;
- Increase in the number of people with disabilities as decision leaders, managers, and supervisors;
- Increase in the number of meaningful relationships with recruitment sources;
- Decrease in the number of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)–related reports and incidents; and
- Decrease in staff turnover attributed to ADA issues.

Likewise, the following are examples of outcomes related to including people with disabilities in the workforce:

- Increase in the percentage of employees (with and without disabilities) reporting positive perceptions of the work setting and specifically referencing diversity,
- Full integration of inclusive recruitment and retention policies and practices that become common in the work setting,
- Decrease in the overall costs of turnover,¹

¹ The return on investment is proven by calculating the cost of turnover.



Courtesy of MetroWest

A MetroWest-branded clock ticks toward the day's end for Craig Coleman (*left*), senior transportation coordinator, and Tyler Terrasi, grants support coordinator. For Coleman, who has quadriplegia, the Central Massachusetts agency provided an adjustable desk and computer trackball with a mouse. Terrasi, who is totally blind, uses screen-reader software with text-to-speech output. Such adaptations and equipment allow them to perform their jobs efficiently.

- Increase in the production of work products and services that reflect inclusive practice and regard for people with disabilities, and
- Increase in career ladder opportunities and positions of authority for employees with disabilities.

Conclusion

People with disabilities deserve to have the same career expectations as those without disabilities, including job security, interesting assignments, career advancement opportunities, and a feeling of usefulness to society. Transit jobs have all of these qualities and more. Transit can be more equitable if the industry fosters a more inclusive workplace that reflects its riders and also if strategically targeted recruitment and retention of employees with disabilities promise to ease some of the strain of deepening labor shortages.

REFERENCES

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Employment Projections. U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC. <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/occupational-projections-and-characteristics.htm>.

2. Dickens, M. *Workforce Shortages Impacting Public Transportation Recovery*. APTA. 2022. <https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-SURVEY-BRIEF-Workforce-Shortages-March-2022.pdf>.
3. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics—2022*. U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC, February 23, 2023. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>.
4. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11b.htm>.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Disability Impacts All of Us*. Atlanta, Ga., May 15, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.
6. Langlois, J. A., S. Maggi, T. Harris, E. M. Simonsick, L. Ferrucci, et al. Self-Report of Difficulty in Performing Functional Activities Identifies a Broad Range of Disability in Old Age. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, Vol. 44, No. 12, 1996. pp. 1421–28. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.1996.tb04065.x>.
7. Transit Workforce Center. *Recruiting Seniors and Retirees: Cape Cod Regional Transit Authority*. September 2022. https://www.transitworkforce.org/resource_library/recruiting-seniors-and-retirees-ccrta/.