



TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Questions?

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\$137,281



One reason skilled workers leave the public sector is a lack of competitive pay.



Strategies for Recruiting and Retaining Minnesota's Transportation Workforce

What Was the Need?

As older employees retire and younger workers fill their roles, organizations must naturally adjust to accommodate their changing workforce. In the transportation industry, shifting demographics have also brought new attitudes regarding technical jobs. The result is that fewer engineers and other highly skilled professionals are entering the field, and keeping those who do is becoming increasingly difficult. To address this changing landscape, transportation agencies of all sizes must be prepared to meet the challenges ahead or risk falling behind.

Serving communities of varying sizes and needs, Minnesota's transportation agencies rely on a qualified workforce to deliver a range of projects and services. Without a reliable pipeline of dedicated staff, these agencies could experience disruptions in the important work they provide.

What Was Our Goal?

The study sought to investigate the growing workforce shortage in Minnesota's transportation industry, identify the possible causes and determine strategies to improve how agencies across the state find and keep workers.

What Did We Do?

Researchers began by reviewing published literature to better understand the changing labor market as well as current trends and best practices in human resources strategies.

A survey of an anonymous sample of 149 workers currently employed in both the public and private sectors of Minnesota's transportation industry gauged this population's perceptions on a variety of job-related topics, such as workplace satisfaction, loyalty and career support. The research team conducted one-on-one follow-up interviews with 14 employees to explore these issues in more depth.

Combining their findings, researchers developed a list of strategies to address the most common themes impeding transportation agencies' efforts to recruit and retain employees.

What Did We Learn?

With fewer qualified applicants entering the workforce and a limited talent pool to draw from, employers in both the public and private sectors are constantly competing to fill vacancies. Transportation jobs in the public sector offer several enticing advantages over their private counterparts, including more competitive benefits, a perception of greater stability during economic downturns, flexible hours, greater work-life balance and variety of work. Conversely, the benefits of private sector jobs are thought to be higher salaries, more advancement opportunities, better-defined expectations and less bureaucratic red tape.

In both the public and private sectors, jobs in rural areas tend to be harder to fill and attract less diverse applicants than those in urban areas. Respondents in this study suggested that more targeted recruitment strategies and clearly worded job descriptions could improve these efforts.

Acknowledging that workforce-related challenges will be different for agencies across the state and that systemic change is never easy, researchers developed a list of recommendations to help public transportation agencies recruit and retain a top-notch workforce:

Across the transportation industry, public and private employers are experiencing workforce shortages and an uncertain future. Minnesota's public transportation agencies sought an objective evaluation of their employment strategies to inform changes and avoid disruptions in service.

“Like employers everywhere, Minnesota’s transportation agencies need to evolve in order to attract and keep a top-notch workforce.”

—Lyndon Robjent,
Director of Public Works,
Carver County

“For some organizations, the workplace culture is deeply rooted and can be challenging to change. I commend the agencies for their willingness to take this journey and make sure they are a place where the most talented people want to work.”

—Kenneth Bartlett,
Professor, University of
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While transportation agencies have traditionally attracted men, the percentage of women in the labor force is expected to continue to grow.

- **Promote the assets.** Make sure that the benefits of working at Minnesota’s public transportation agencies are conveyed and promoted to all hiring managers so they can be relayed to applicants.
- **Increase awareness of transportation careers.** Create a marketing strategy that exposes younger people to the transportation industry. Aim to reach and excite students about transportation-related employment options early in their education, possibly while they are still in middle school.
- **Describe jobs realistically.** Detailing the job’s expectations from the outset will go a long way toward reducing potential frustrations.
- **Reduce red tape.** When possible, allow for exceptions in hiring, compensation and advancement practices. Protocols such as paperwork and budget requests that require a substantial time commitment or advanced planning can be barriers to filling positions quickly or in response to a sudden need.
- **Offer mentorships.** Provide formal opportunities for employees to learn from each other, with the expectation that these could lead to job promotion.
- **Plan for succession.** Ensure that retirements and other vacancies will be filled quickly and possibly with internal candidates. Relying on existing employees to absorb a departing co-worker’s work can lead to burnout and resentment.
- **Document workplace practices.** Invest in knowledge management systems so that key information can be retained as employees retire.

What’s Next?

These recommendations can provide hiring managers with more immediate strategies that, if implemented, can help transportation agencies become more competitive in their efforts to attract and retain a qualified workforce for years to come.

This Technical Summary pertains to Report 2021-06, “Workforce Planning and Human Resource Development Strategies for Minnesota’s Public Transportation Agencies,” published March 2021. The full report can be accessed at mndot.gov/research/reports/2021/202106.pdf.