

## Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Joint Workforce Investment (JWI) Program

### ORGANIZATIONAL AND INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### Interviewee(s) Position(s) and Responsibilities

Mr. Mike Hursh serves as the Deputy Director for Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) Maintenance and Security. He co-leads the Joint Workforce Investment (JWI) for VTA. He is a member of the management team for the Maintenance division. Tom Fink is the JWI director for ATU Local 265.

#### Organizational Personnel Size

VTA employs roughly 2,100 people; around 650 of these employees work in maintenance. In addition, VTA is combined with the Congested Management Agency (CMA), which adds another 800 employees.

#### Organizational Workforce Demographics

Over 80% of the VTA workforce is over the age of 55. Around 90% of the employees are male. VTA's ethnic diversity is representative of the Santa Clara Valley.

### PRACTICE BACKGROUND

#### Practice Summary

The Joint Workforce Investment (JWI), established in 2006, is a joint labor management partnership between the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 265 (ATU). Both organizations operate together as one "JWI" team. Three primary programs were brought together under the JWI initiative. These programs are described below:

#### Maintenance Career Ladders Training Project (MCLTP)

This one-year project ended in 2008. During that time, it established the Mechanic Helper program. The Maintenance division has three positions: 1) service worker, 2) service mechanic and 3) full transit mechanic. First, the program involved utilizing funding that was meant to support the salaries of vacant full transit mechanic positions and reallocating that funding to create vacancies at the mechanic helper (mechanic trainee) level. The program then provided training to mechanic trainees in order for them to be eligible for promotional opportunities. The curriculum was based on the results of a skills-assessment conducted for VTA by a neutral third party firm, Balance Point. The program provided a career ladder opportunity for 10 former Service Workers (vehicle cleaners and fuelers) by promoting them into entry-level mechanic helper positions. To qualify for the program, service workers had to pass a basic automotive skills course offered at VTA partner, Evergreen Community College, with a grade of "B" or better. The external Mechanic Helper training also involved enrolling employees in an 18-month Associates Degree program at local community colleges. Partnerships with these institutions were developed in 1998, but utilizing the partnership as part of a formal program was a new venture. As part of their training, VTA paid for employees to attend evening classes that could later be used as part of a bachelor's degree program at local four-year universities. Internal training was also conducted in the evenings and

employees were paid overtime as they completed their courses. There were nine training modules consisting of both classroom and on-the-job/hands-on application with mentors. This project was funded in part by a Governor's 15% Discretionary Workforce Investment Act grant, awarded in 2007. Once employees at the Mechanic Helper level had completed the required training, they were promoted into the service mechanic positions. The positions left vacant as the service workers entered the mechanic helper training program were then filled with new employees. In doing this, VTA addressed the bus mechanic shortages and provided members of the community with living wage level employment. With the help of the grant, even employees in the full transit mechanic position had their own training program, which focused on improving their technical skills as well as developing them as leaders. VTA currently has 63 service workers, 11 service mechanics, and 120 full transit mechanic positions.

#### New Operator/Mentor Pilot Project

This one-year pilot project, now complete, paired 26 new operators who graduated in January 2008 with 17 veteran exemplary operators who acted as mentors. Prior to working with new operators, mentors were trained via a course offered by a local university partner. The program provided best practice customer service and job stress coping skills through on-the-job mentoring and classroom training. The mentoring and classroom training followed a coordinated curriculum, the content of which was driven by the experiences of veteran operators. With the support of the JWI team, a third party consultant was used to collect job relevant data, collective work experiences and lessons learned and then form that information into several training modules. New operators and veterans have indicated that the curriculum was more "real and relevant" because of this inclusive development process. Seeing their contribution reflected in the curriculum also developed a sense of professional pride among many employees.

At the beginning of the mentoring relationship, the new operators would spend eight hour days on the veteran's bus and then later the veteran would spend a similar amount of time on the new operator's bus. New operators were brought back for classroom sessions with mentors at three critical junctures in their year-long apprenticeship. The collective bargaining agreement between ATU and VTA created the apprentice designation in 2008. This early intervention prevents new operators from developing bad habits and attitudes that amplify stress. Eventually, when the new operators began to drive on their own, they were encouraged to call their mentor at any time to discuss problems. They also could use their free time to watch DVD modules that covered various solutions to common problems. VTA and ATU are now developing a permanent operator apprenticeship program. The mentoring program is supported by a JDIF (Job Development Initiative Fund) grant from the Chancellor's Office of the California Community College system.

#### Health and Wellness Project

This mentor-led, "operator to operator" project will conduct various informal activities at the three bus operating divisions to promote the JWI approach to health, wellness and professional development. Activities will emphasize mastering the "human element" of driving a bus and applying stress management/health and wellness techniques. During the project, new operators are brought in to a classroom to debrief after completing some

initial driving time. They discuss their experiences and whether or not they were able to “let go” of the stress that some situations may have caused them. The curriculum of this project focuses on teaching operators how to deal with stress and make good judgments while alone. The curriculum’s workbook introduces a 1.) Encounter, 2.) Defuse 3.) Re-center and 4.) “Let Go” stress management model and helps operators learn how to apply the model to their own experiences. For additional resources, JWI points to the models introduced in *Bus Drivers: Occupational Stress and Stress Prevention* by M.A.J. Kompier of the Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, University of Nijmegen.

Two additional programs are used to support the educational and leadership development components of the JWI. These programs are described below:

#### Transit Career Ladder Project (TCLP)

This project partners with San Jose City College (SJCC) to build career ladder training for current VTA employees, and reach out to low-income young adults providing recruitment and training opportunities for careers in transit. The program features peer instructors providing transit-related curriculum both on the SJCC campus and at VTA work sites, and will utilize computer-based modules to support independent study. It also includes high skills upgrade training for maintenance mechanics. This project is also funded in part by a Community College Chancellor’s Office Job Development Incentive Fund (JDIF) grant awarded in 2008.

#### TCLP Leadership Academy Pilot Project

This pilot project, slated to begin Fall 2009, will be a five-day workshop series focused on improving communications, solving problems at the lowest level, and preparing incumbents for promotional opportunities at VTA. Based on the outcome of the pilot, curriculum will be adapted for future SJCC credit classes.

#### *Name and Acronym*

Joint Workforce Investment (JWI)

#### *Goals and Purpose*

The goals of the JWI are the following:

- Increase employee performance, job satisfaction, health and well being through professional development and organized workplace activities.
- Equip employees with the skills and support necessary to be promoted
- Attract well-qualified recruits
- Meet VTA’s need to enhance the responsiveness, reliability, and attractiveness of public transit service in Santa Clara County
- Address the shortage of skilled workers and to solve operational problems more effectively.

#### **Issue(s) the Practice Originally Intended to Address**

##### *Current Recruitment and Retention Challenges*

The JWI was meant to address several recruiting and retention issues.

In the Maintenance division, the majority of the full transit mechanics were close to retirement. In addition, in 2005 and 2006 when the economy was healthy, there was a lot of opportunity for skilled mid-career maintenance employee to find better paying jobs in

the private sector. Also, it was difficult for employees to advance in the organization because there was no forum for them to learn about or practice the skills needed at the next level. At a certain point in 2006, there were ten vacancies at the full transit mechanic level that were not being filled. Whether it was the high cost of living in the Santa Clara Valley or the 3 to 4 years of experience required, there was a significant lack of qualified applicants applying for those positions. With the impending retirement of skilled senior employees, the JWI team, including VTA and ATU, met and devised a plan. The resulting Maintenance Career Ladder Training Program (MCLTP) would take the ten vacancies at the full transit mechanic, move them to the service mechanic level and then hire a consultant to identify skill gaps for each level with the goal of promoting employees who completed the training. The underlying recruiting challenge that sparked the initiative was finding individuals with enough skill and experience to fill full transit mechanic positions. The retention challenge was getting junior employees interested in making a career out of their job in the Maintenance division. Another retention challenge was retaining senior employees who would often retire as soon as they are eligible and relocate to areas with lower cost of living.

In the Operations division, new operators were not receiving the guidance that they needed to capitalize on their new positions. Historically, there has been a wide training gap for operators where, after achieving competence in operating a bus, additional training and support were virtually non-existent. The previous assumption was that if the agency taught an individual to drive a bus, the rest should come naturally (e.g. customer service, people skills, etc.).

*“Traditionally, it has been the transit industries assumption that the ability to drive large vehicles is the only skill that counted. In fact, the key challenge of a transit operator lies in the area of service delivery and the management of the human problems that arise during the course of their work. Among other things, this training and post-training support gap resulted in a low retention rate for new operators.”*

*– Tom Fink, JWI Director*

The JWI team agreed that driving is just the precursor to the job and that the “real job” was dealing with the human element. Operators must balance their focus on operating a large vehicle, which requires an aggressive amount of energy, with greeting patrons and defusing situations, an altogether different kind of energy. This balance is sometimes described by operators as “switching on” and “switching off” the different competencies. To add to the issue, operators are working alone which makes collaborative problem solving and sharing of stress a challenge. JWI then realized that there were no current training or support resources that addressed these competencies. In the past, operators may have had accidents or left VTA because they were overwhelmed with the challenge of doing their job without having a consistent and reliable resource to reach out to with questions or problems. The New Operator/ Mentor Pilot project and the Health and Wellness project were meant to address these challenges.

#### *Criteria Used & Data Collected to Realize Condition/Severity of the Problem*

Although the management team from the Maintenance division did not provide any quantitative data, the duration of time and amount of unfruitful effort placed on trying to

fill the ten full transit mechanic positions was used as evidence to support the restructuring, consulting, training development, grant requests, and internal recruiting efforts. In the Operations division, anecdotal evidence, observations and exit interview data were used as the criteria to support the development of the New Operator/Mentor Project and Health and Wellness Project.

#### *Anticipated Results of Practice Implementation*

In the short term, the management team anticipated filling the ten vacancies in Maintenance and seeing improvements in the performance and retention of new bus operators. In the long term, they anticipated a shift in the culture at VTA. They felt that, with the opportunity to gain skills and advance, employees would take a more motivated approach toward work and increase their level of organizational commitment. Lastly, they anticipated that the training would support a continual flow of talent moving up the ranks, which would help to avoid future problems caused by the retirement of institutional knowledge.

#### **Actual Results of Practice Implementation**

##### *Benefits from Practice*

As a result of JWI, the level of skill and organizational commitment across the VTA increased. Specifically, ten mechanic helpers graduated their training programs and were promoted into the ten service mechanic vacancies and improvements were observed in the performance and retention of new bus operators. Anecdotal conversations between the management team and employees have indicated that employee morale has also increased due to the program. For example, employees who formally envisioned being in service worker positions for the rest of their career has now begun to actively pursue promotional opportunities. Additionally, retention statistics tracking and exit interviews, self-assessments, and anecdotal conversations have indicated that the mentoring and health and wellness programs have had a positive impact on their work experience. Comparison of statistical records and other indicators between mentored and non-mentored operators revealed dramatic differences in key indicators of competence and confidence.

##### *Alleviated Workforce Issues*

A Program Performance Statistics Summary used by VTA benchmarked quarterly data comparing JWI participants and non JWI participants on four categories: absenteeism, retention, and number of grievances, and complaints. The amount of JWI participants had grown significantly since 2008. According to the data collected each quarter, this initiative helped the agency alleviate several workforce issues. For example, the data collected from April 1, 2009 to June 30, 2009 shows the following for bus operators:

- Less absenteeism in JWI vs. non JWI (3.5% vs. 8.5%)
- Higher retention rate in JWI vs. non JWI (100% vs. 84.3%)
- Slightly less grievance per employee in JWI vs. non JWI (.5 vs. 1.7)
- Slightly less complaints per employee in JWI vs. Non JWI (.5 vs. 2)

In the Maintenance division, there have been 9 employees who have graduated through the MCLTP program, and one employee who was able to complete the training early and was promoted.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### Implementation Leader

Mr. Hursh, representing the Maintenance division management, Mr. Russ Anderson, representing technical training in the Maintenance division and Ed Dolores, a union representative, led the implementation effort. Some of these meetings involved Shellie Albright, a Human Resource representative, and Tom Fink, a union representative. The representatives met several times over a six month period and eventually drafted a memorandum of agreement, which addressed the relationship between the new program and the collective bargaining agreement. They also worked to develop and submit a grant request to support the program.

### Achieving Organizational Buy-In

#### *Level of Buy-In Obtained*

With a brief explanation of the goals of the program, the team obtained signatures of approval from VTA's General Manager, Chief Operating Officer (COO), and president of the union.

### Communication to Employees

VTA utilized the pre-existing quarterly Employee Forums for each division to communicate JWI projects to employees. The COO, Deputy Directors, and division leads briefed employees on the program and answered questions. The agency also used their employee newsletters to inform employees about the program. The ATU publicizes the JWI through its newsletter and through presentations at regular membership and executive board meetings.

#### *Training to Familiarize Employees*

DVD training modules were developed to provide employees with the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to make good judgments and solve problems. The DVD modules helped to supplement the classroom training. Many of the DVDs contained situational judgment activities that instructed employees in how to react in certain on-the-job situations.

### Tools to Facilitate Delivery

VTA purchased survey and consulting services from Balance Point, a company that specialized in strategic career coaching and leadership development. Balance Point developed and implemented a training needs assessment survey and helped to design the training for different position levels. Most of the internal training curriculum had already been developed and only needed to be slightly modified to meet the results of the needs assessment. The external training from community colleges was already in place.

### Time to Implement Practice

The program took one year from idea stage to full implementation.

### Implementation Costs

There was a cost to implementing the program. Direct costs were associated with planning and design meetings (\$300,000 in time spent) and consulting services (\$18,000), while indirect costs occurred from having employees in training instead of doing their regular job. Some of the indirect cost can be negated by offering trainings after hours.

### Documentation of Practice Implementation, Maintenance and/or Success

The JWI team is required to submit a quarterly progress reports that compare employees who are part of the JWI and employees that are not, in terms of absenteeism, grievances,



and retention.

## MAINTENANCE

### Length of Practice Existence

The program has been in existence for since 2006.

### Participants

#### *Target Job Type*

The MCLTP is specific to mechanics. The New Operator/Mentor Project and the Health and Wellness Project are specific to operators. The TCLP and the Leadership Academy are used to support all VTA employees.

#### *Target Audience*

The target audience for the JWI is the employee who would like to improve their skills, learn new skills, advance within the organization and manage stress.

### Reaction from Employees

#### *Positive Reactions*

Employees have reacted positively to the program. Employees have indicated that they look at their work differently and that work is more enjoyable now that they are learning, advancing, and can utilize veteran resources when solving problems and relieving stress. Through the curriculum development process, veteran operators realized how many different skills they had amassed during their tenure. They began to pay more attention to what they were doing on the job so that they could contribute more to the curriculum. Veteran operators have also commented that the mentoring role prevents them from personally slipping below the standard that they set for new operators.

#### *Negative Reactions*

Employees complained when, because of the downturn in the economy, the program was temporarily suspended. The program is on hold because VTA is not allowed to recruit new candidates. Since they cannot recruit new candidates, promoting entry-level employees to more advanced levels would cause an issue because VTA cannot afford to have vacancies at the entry level,

## EVALUATION

### Criteria Used to Evaluate Strengths and Weaknesses

As previously mentioned, the agency collects data on the percentage of absenteeism, retention, grievances, and complaints for both bus operators and mechanics. Each quarter, the agency compares the data from JWI participants to non-JWI participants.

#### *Evaluation Results, Reasons for Success/Failure, and Recommended Criteria*

VTA indicated that they would someday like to conduct an employee satisfaction, morale, or commitment survey to attempt to measure the success of JWI. An informal indication of success of this program is the number of retirement-eligible employees who continue to work at the agency.

#### *Practice Results*

JWI produced the expected results of advancing entry-level employees into more advanced positions and providing them with the resources they needed to excel in those

positions. Additionally, the data collected each quarter shows that the JWI program has helped the agency alleviate several workforce issues, such as absenteeism, retention, and number of grievances and complaints.
<b>Impact on Agency Operational and Maintenance Performance</b>
VTA has not measured the impact of the JWI on agency operational or maintenance performance.
<b>Pros of Practice</b>
The cost of implementing and running the program is far less expensive and far more beneficial than former practices (e.g. attempting to recruit and retain senior-level employees). The program improves the morale of employees, while building their skills and addressing their stress levels. The investment in employee training also increases their organizational commitment.
<b>Cons of Practice</b>
The amount of administrative time it took to write and submit the grant request was an enormous burden. A case file had to be developed for each employee. The whole grant request process took over forty hours of one administrators weekly time to manage.
<b>Contextual or External Factors Impacting Success</b>
<i>Factors Facilitating Success</i>
VTA commented that their ability to actively collaborate with the union has been the single biggest factor in the program's success. The program enhances the union's ability to serve the health, wellness, professional development and career advancement needs of its members. In addition, the union is responsible for representing each employee and if employees have low morale, then it increases the potential for an extra burden on them. For example, low employee morale or satisfaction often leads to more grievances and more complaints, which the union has to then address. Also, working closely with Human Resources was integral to making the most of this program.
<i>Factors Inhibiting Success</i>
Unfortunately, this program is tied to the economy. One implication of the fiscal year 2009 economic downturn is that the program has been temporarily suspended because recruiting is on hold.

## TRANSFERABILITY

<b>Temporary vs. Long-Term Solution</b>
The program does represent a long-term solution that can be activated as needed. During conservative budgetary periods at VTA, the program will most likely be on hold but never discontinued. The biggest factor that will impact the success of this program for other agencies is their relationship and willingness to work with their unions.
<i>Usefulness in Various Economies</i>
The program would be more active in a strong economy because VTA would have the ability to hire new employees.
<i>Impact of Future Transportation Trends on Practice Success</i>
People are becoming less dependent on individual vehicles and more dependent on transit. Agencies and unions must work together to meet the growing and changing demands of the traveling public.



### Transferability to Other Organizations

Any transit agency and union could create a program similar to the JWI. The one thing the agency found extremely valuable is hiring an external consultant to confidentially assess the strengths and weaknesses of each employee. The assessments identified training needs, allowing the agency to appropriately tailor their training. Another agency's assessment may result in different training put the process for implementation and maintenance should be identical.

### Documentation Available to Other Organizations

At the request of VTA's Transit Planning & Operations Committee, the management team provides a regular quarterly report on the progress made by the program. Each quarterly report covers a three month period, including an update on the major activities and accomplishments for each project.

## CONCLUSION

### Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The agency and the union learned the value of working together on the common ground of professional development and public service. They learned the high value that accrues to both organizations, when employee members have access to career ladders and professional development support. This is especially true when curriculum and training programs are driven by a facilitated peer-to-peer ethic (i.e. mentoring). They learned the value of partnership with community members, including labor, business, non profits, social service providers and educational institutions. They learned that, during times of economic instability, they must reach out and secure funding to support training initiatives through grants and other means. In this vein, the ATU set up its own training fund based on hourly wage deductions. They learned that requiring mechanic helpers to maintain a "B" average in their community college courses and to attend courses on their own time encouraged the employees to make more of a commitment to the program. Lastly, they learned it is important that any training or advancement program that is implemented address all levels in the division so that the increase in skills and mobility of one group does not negatively affect the progress of another.

### Practice Innovativeness

The reallocation of resources and the partnering with the union and community colleges to start a career ladder are the most innovative parts of this program. The program was featured in a very complimentary segment aired on KTVU (FOX) Channel 2 on August 25, 2008, which was shown at the September Board of Directors meeting. A similar segment aired on Channel 7 (ABC) News on the same date. The program was also featured as one of ten solutions cited in Working Partnership USA's "Life in the Valley Economy, Silicon Valley Progress Report 2008", published in August 2008.

### Practice Website

<http://strongorganizations.com/mcltp.html>

<http://strongorganizations.com/JWI.html>

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