

Riding on the same bus

P O L I C Y
M A N I F E S T O

July 2024



BUILDING THE ROAD AHEAD FOR THE AUSTRALIAN BUS INDUSTRY

Buses have never been more crucial to our economic and social stability and success.

As an essential service, the recruitment, retention, and respect of our bus drivers are of utmost importance.

Today, our drivers often feel overlooked and undervalued, making it harder than ever to attract and retain them in the industry.

**Let's move forward together,
Riding on the Same Bus.**



B-Line

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Bus Industry Confederation acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, live and play. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal people and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of Australia.

Many of the transport routes we use today, from rail lines, to roads, to water crossings, follow the traditional Songlines, Trade Routes and Ceremonial Paths in Country that our nation's First Peoples followed for tens of thousands of years.

The Bus Industry Confederation is committed to honouring Aboriginal peoples' cultural and spiritual connections to the lands, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.



Image courtesy of Kinetic

Kinetic's bespoke Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan design symbolises our acknowledgement, role and commitment in reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The centrepiece of the design represents Kinetic's approach to reconciliation surrounded by our connection and work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The background represents the lands on which we move people and the continued connection to community, country and culture.

The design was created by Indigenous design agency, ingeous studios, in collaboration with the Indigenous Design Labs, a program inspiring young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into creative industries.

CHAIRPERSONS FORWARD



The pandemic that shook Australia and the world from January 2020, through to late 2022, left an indelible legacy amongst many industries. The bus and coach industry, which had provided for decades millions of passenger trips via route, school, charter, long distance and coach operations were one such industry to feel the effects of lockdowns, rampant illness, and reduced services.

During the height of the pandemic, Government, the Employees' representatives, and the Operators collaborated to work out how to best keep public transport running for essential workers, the socially disadvantaged, our precious school children and to transport potentially infected persons, returning to Australia, into quarantine.

For the first time, the essential nature of public transport was acknowledged, and our bus drivers were finally recognised for the heroes they are.

The unfortunate and ongoing consequence of the pandemic was that bus driver numbers substantially decreased, and recruitment and improved retention rates became critical to ensure the continuation of services.

The Bus Industry Confederation (BIC), which is the peak national body that represents state bus and coach associations, bus and coach operators, chassis suppliers, body manufacturers and associated service providers, resolved to embark on an ambitious recruitment and retention project, designed to improve the industry's image and culture to make a career in the bus and coach industry more palatable.

The Australian Public Transport Industrial Association (APTIA), the industrial relations arm of BIC, along with Consultants, Navigate Work and the Hero Co embarked upon a comprehensive research journey across the country, meeting with bus operators, large and small, coach operators, university transport experts, transport regulators, government owned transport utilities and trade unions. Meetings were also held with transport partners in the United States, New Zealand and Singapore. The result of the research is the following Policy Manifesto.

This manifesto's theme is [Riding on the Same Bus](#). It makes the case that improved public transport, better working conditions for employees, improved value for money and a better image for the industry can come from a tripartite approach to delivering public bus services - a meaningful tripartite partnership between Government, Trade Unions and Employers representatives.

I commend this manifesto to you as the way to build the road ahead for the Australian bus industry.

Tony Hopkins,
Chairperson BIC and APTIA

INTRODUCTION

The BIC Council and members of APTIA, the industrial arm of BIC, provided funds through a special levy to undertake extensive qualitative research to identify the underlying factors impacting the image of the bus and coach industry. The aim was to make recommendations that would improve recruitment and retention of drivers across the industry.

The research undertaken for the Bus Industry Confederation (BIC) and Australian Public Transport Association (APTIA) Recruitment and Retention Project has identified a range of structural problems that are negatively impacting the bus and coach industry, its image and culture. This manifesto aims to address these structural and policy failings through a series of recommendations.

A second document titled **Workplace Culture Toolkit and Operator Guidelines** provides a raft of interventions that operators could implement to improve workplace culture and current recruitment and retention rates.



APTIA Working Group

Navigate Work and the Hero Co were engaged as consultants to BIC and APTIA for this project. For six weeks during October 2023 to November 2023, qualitative research was conducted across 15 bus and coach depots nationally*, resulting in over 120 hours of face-to-face interviews with drivers, mechanics, middle and upper management.

The consultants also completed online and face to face meetings with senior management from Transport for NSW (TfNSW), Translink Queensland, Transport Workers Union (TWU), Rail, Train and Bus Union (RTBU), SBS Transit Singapore, Institute of Transport and Logistics (ITLS), Transport for Brisbane, Bus & Coach Association NZ and American Public Transport Association (APTA).

A special thanks goes to BIC and those APTIA members and supporters who contributed to the funding of the Manifesto & Toolkit.

*Due to time constraints no depot visits occurred to Northern Territory or ACT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bus and Coach Industry as public passenger transport providers plays a key role in enabling economic growth and the resilience of Australian communities. It supports mobility and job creation through its operations and infrastructure, connects individuals to job centres and provides companies with critical access to workers, skills, and customers.

It drives greater community connection for vulnerable members of our community including our ageing populations and contributes to improved health outcomes. Transitioning from diesel to zero emission buses are achieving all of this whilst also reducing our carbon footprint.

Australia is currently experiencing a shortage of bus and coach drivers and mechanics impacting on the effective delivery of passenger transport as an essential service. This research project and subsequent reports were commissioned by the Bus Industry Confederation (BIC) and the Australian Public Transport Industrial Association (APTIA) in response to the Australia wide persistent recruitment and retention issues affecting operators across all segments of the market.

While recruitment and retention impact on the ability of the bus and coach operators to consistently deliver the essential service, it also has far reaching economic, social and environmental consequences across Australia.

The problem requires an Industry wide and whole of Government approach to solve it.

The Australian Government (Jobs and Skills Australia) statistics outline that the total number of bus and coach drivers across the country has reduced from 49,300 in 2022 to only 38,000 in February 2024. TWU Super also reports that some 52% of all drivers are now employed across the State and Territories by the 10 largest operators.

Most of these operators are publicly listed companies, multi-national organisations, mainly of foreign origin, in partnership with an Australian entity, combined with a few larger private family businesses.

The numbers are not good. The average age of the industry's workforce is 58 years compared to an Australia average of 39 years across all industries. The bus and coach industry also experiences poor gender diversity with 12% female participation.

The percentage difference between permanent employees to casual employees is 62% to 38% and whilst 10 large operators employ up to 52% of all drivers, the remaining 48% of employees work for small to medium sized family owned businesses, who operate predominantly in regional and remote areas of Australia.

At least 90% of all bus operators across the country operate bus services under a service contract with their State regulator. Service contracts, irrelevant of size, are periodically renewed via a competitive tender or negotiated process. The remaining 10% are charter and tourism coach operators who have no or limited contractual relationship with Government contracts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The bus and coach industry, through their operators, deliver an essential service with an associated social good. However, research has identified that there are concerns within the industry about the community's poor perception of travelling by bus. Further there are concerns about poor workforce culture stemming from contractual constraints. The aim of the research detailed in this report was to provide recommendations to improve the image and culture of the industry and subsequently improve recruitment and retention rates of drivers and mechanics.



The research was able to identify that the current negative image and culture is due to

- Repeated adverse media commentary regarding incidents/accidents involving buses, cancellation of services, on board violence and anti-social behaviour.
- A shared societal belief within Australians that driving was not a rewarding job due to stress, long hours and abusive behaviour of passengers.
- The shared unfavourable experiences of drivers who consistently report challenging work conditions, constant workplace stress and feelings of low job satisfaction.

Negative sentiments towards bus driving came from within the industry, the broader Australian community and was reinforced by a negative media narrative.

A 2023 omnibus survey* of 400 Australians was able to identify that 84% of the respondents did not view bus driving as a rewarding job due to stress, long hours, and abusive behaviour. Whilst respondents had positive perceptions about the people who drive buses, they do not believe that the public treat them well.

The negative image needs to be addressed by a government funded campaign to change the public perceptions and behaviours towards bus drivers and travelling by bus.

At the heart of the factors impacting on recruitment and retention of drivers is their low job satisfaction because of poor workplace culture and a contracting environment that sets the driver up to fail.

*Dr Kate Gunby, PHD Econometrics, the Hero Co – Dynata.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the 120 plus hours of face-to-face interviews undertaken for this project the top three causes of low job satisfaction that directly impacts on recruitment and retention of staff are:

The challenging work conditions that included:

- Unachievable scheduling/split shifts
- Poor workplace facilities/amenities
- Disrespect/violence/antisocial behaviour of passengers

The constant workplace stress and burnout due to the psychosocial hazards of lack of autonomy, micromanagement, and pressure to meet operators contractual Key Performance indicators (KPIs)

The general feeling of being undervalued and unappreciated by both the community and the operator's management team

It was evident from the research that the current difficulties in recruitment and retention are due to issues across the entire Australian passenger transport ecosystem.

The structural issues associated with the current contracting model promotes behaviours of the operator that increases the psychosocial stressors on the drivers.

The research was able to identify that there are structural problems outside the operator's current sphere of influence where contracts are creating a race to the bottom for operators.

These structural problems need to be addressed by Government and policy makers and are canvassed in this Policy Manifesto.

Factors that can be controlled by the operator and impact on the driver and mechanic's job satisfaction and therefore recruitment and retention has been addressed in a separate document [Workplace Culture Toolkit and Operator Guidelines](#) - An operators guide to improving the work conditions of their employees.

The researchers were able to identify excellent examples of strong workplace culture that supported strong retention of staff. This occurred where supervisory support of drivers was at its highest with allocation of front-line supervisor for every 45 drivers (1:45). At its worst the allocation of supervisor to drivers was 1:300.

Our research showed that the current recruitment and retention crisis, engulfing the bus industry, is a result of poor contract design, flawed procurement processes and inappropriate, and inefficient contract management.

The results of this study clearly identified a continuum of contract management approaches. A master servant relationship between the regulator and the operator was identified as the most common relationship. The researchers were able to observe the lived experience of drivers and operators from this power imbalance and its associated negative health impacts and resultant low levels of retention of good staff.

Interviews with drivers and mechanics indicated a disconnect between the workforce and management whether through the lack of effective line management or through lack of proper representation at the decision-making level.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



To resolve these issues, the authors recommend the adoption of a tripartite framework (government, union, operator) for the design, procurement, and management of bus contracts.

This approach was observed in overseas experience and shown as an effective model to address contemporary issues.

Adopting such a framework would ensure that an equilibrium is established to support drivers, operators, and government to achieve the mutual goals of an effective public transport system.

These goals include better service planning, better wages and working conditions for employees, better value for money and societal (economic, social, and environmental) outcomes for Government.

Achievement of these outcomes would contribute to a better image of the bus industry and improved workplace culture and productivity.

The results of the research were able to identify that while the Government had an opportunity to significantly impact the recruitment and retention of drivers and mechanics through a fair and sustainable contract management system underpinned by a tripartite framework, each operator also plays a role in reducing the negative impacts and reinforcing and supporting the positive aspects of the bus and coach industry.

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

To better understand these issues the APTIA Research Team, comprising BIC's National IR Manager and Navigate Work conducted qualitative research through a visitation schedule across 15 bus depots nationally* over a 6 week period in October and November 2023.

Face to face interviews were conducted with:

- 50 Drivers
- 20 Mechanics
- 20 Depot/Yard staff
- 5 board room meetings with senior management totalling 92 participants.
- 15 front line supervisors/operations managers

On line and face to face meetings were conducted with:

- Senior management in the union movement inclusive of the Rail, Tram & Bus Union (RBTU) and Transport Workers Union (TWU)
- Regulators including TfNSW and TransLink Brisbane
- SBS Transit Singapore
- Bus and Coach Association of New Zealand and representatives from their larger operators
- America Public Transportation Association (APTA)
- Institute of Transport and Logistics Studies-Sydney University

*Due to time constraints no depot visits occurred to Northern Territory or ACT

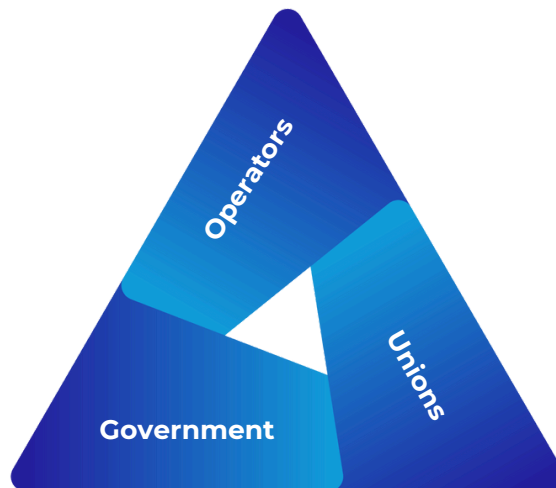


Berrima Buslines

WHAT IS A TRIPARTITE APPROACH

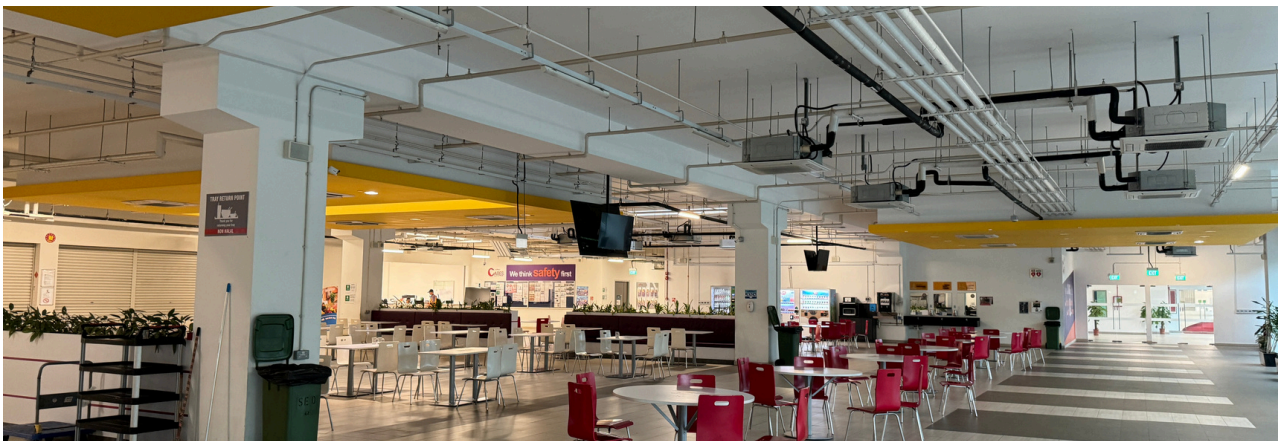
Tripartism has proven to be effective in fostering consensus and compromise in decision making since the early 20th century, when first implemented by the International Labour Organisation, a United Nations agency.

As a governing framework within the passenger transport industry, tripartism is where the worker (union), employer (operator) and government (procurer) are seen as equals at the bargaining table.



This approach allows all parties to freely discuss and address, issues of economic and social concern impacting the industry and its customers. Forming consensus requires compromise and creates an environment that ensures enduring change, improvement and agreed initiatives that can withstand changes to government.

This framework was seen 'inaction' during visits to Singapore who have long used and relied on this approach to deliver the essential service of passenger transport effectively and efficiently.



SBS Transit Singapore

KEY MANIFESTO RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Introduction of a tripartite framework for the design and management of passenger transport services</p>	<p>The key recommendation of this project is that a tripartite framework should be implemented in all States and jurisdictions. Tripartism between the Government, Operators and Worker representatives would aim to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The design and management of all transport service contracts were designed, implemented, managed, and reviewed with a sustainable and realistic approach to delivering effective public transport solutions. This would ensure improved outcomes for drivers, operators, and passengers and in turn the Government • Services routes On Time Running(OTR) KPI's were realistic and not punitive • The State and Territory Work Health and Safety (WHS) regulations on Psychosocial Hazards as a bus driver were effectively addressed and mitigated • The current awarding of contracts based on price only which has created a race to the bottom is stopped. Operators need to compete for contracts with a reasonable level of remuneration consistent with an appropriate risk to reward ratio and to ensure that the necessary investment into their workplace culture is undertaken
<p>Design and implement a community campaign to address negative sentiments towards buses and drivers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should engage in a community campaign that addresses the negative sentiments towards bus drivers and the passenger transport industry • The current negative public perception of drivers contributes to the poor attraction and retention of drivers and therefore impacts on operators ability to deliver a consistent service
<p>Commitment to improving the working conditions of bus drivers</p>	<p>Currently drivers experience very low job satisfaction due to the poor working conditions. Specifically, Government policy changes need to occur to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transit Police or equivalent in regions with high levels of anti-social behaviour • Reduction/removal of split shifts and On Time Running (OTR) with its current punitive impacts on drivers • A national improvement in wages to reflect the essential service and the high level of competency required to compete the role and the flexibility to meet the needs of an ageing and retiring workforce • The development and implementation of Micro credentialling of driver's skills • Depot and community infrastructure to ensure drivers have access to clean, accessible, toilet and meal break areas • Safety within buses and coaches including passengers wearing seatbelts • Governments need to embark upon a joint funding process to ensure the public and operators are educated on their obligations with respect to safety on and around buses and coaches • Further research to address Gender diversity

CURRENT BUS SERVICE PROCUREMENT

Australia has a long history of privatising or franchising bus services spanning back three decades when Melbourne bus services were franchised in 1993, followed by Adelaide buses (1995-6), Perth buses (1996), Newcastle public transport (2017), and the commencement of privatisation in Sydney in 2018. Australian metropolitan bus services are therefore predominantly run by the private sector, except for Brisbane Transport, Transport Canberra and MetroTas in Tasmania.

Across and within the jurisdictions various models of privatisation/franchising have been adopted along with different methods of contract renewal.

In NSW, competitive tender is the standard approach for Government procurement of bus services. Competitive tendering is also gaining momentum in other States as the preferred method of Government procurement, with negotiation still occurring in some non-metropolitan areas. There is also a shift occurring in many Government contracts where the assets associated with delivering the services (depots, buses, staff, intellectual property) are being 'nationalised' by State Governments, reducing trans-generational bus operators competitive advantage associated with private ownership.

Bus depot ownership by private operators is perceived to make it more difficult to achieve genuine contestability and may also complicate the transition to zero emission buses, which require significant investment in depots for charging infrastructure.

There are varied views about the benefits of privatisation. Critics consistently raise concerns about the potential negative impacts on workers, service reliability, the quality of the service and the tender approach to contract renewal i.e. competitive tendering of service contracts or negotiating performance-based renewals.

While privatisation and contract renewal by tender may have delivered significant savings to the taxpayer, this has come at a cost to the stakeholders including operators and drivers. The subsequent observed "race to the bottom" has significantly impacted service reliability due to the substantial loss of drivers from the workforce.

Poorly developed contract arrangements, including the development of unrealistic Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and significant financial penalties for non-compliance create a negative environment for drivers.

Examples of this include:

- Due to the current driver shortage, bus operators in some States are choosing to cancel a run due to driver shortages rather than run behind schedule as the penalty is lower for a cancellation than the penalties associated with not meeting the on-time running schedule (OTR). The impact is that the passengers face cancelled bus runs rather than delays, increasing anger and negativity towards bus services which may manifest in abuse towards drivers
- Contracts impose significant abatements or penalties if a driver does not meet on time running (OTR) schedules. The driver is placed under immense pressure to meet these schedules, often leading to behaviours that are not consistent with psychosocial safety, whilst operators are penalised for not meeting a KPI
- The Trade Union movement argues that competitive tendering places a downward pressure on private bus operators to degrade workers' wages and conditions to offer a competitive price for services. It is their view that for private bus operators to bid and offer services at the lowest price, the changes they must make to their operations requires drivers to operate at unsafe staffing levels, for unsafe periods and in accordance with unreasonable timetables.

CURRENT BUS SERVICE PROCUREMENT

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) argues that this pressure can lead drivers to engage in unsafe road practices and operators to cut corners while maintaining buses.

This paper has not assessed contracts across the various states and territories. However, the authors have observed evidence of the perverse outcomes from the procurement models that are in breach of the Australian Governments model Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws which have been adopted and enacted by every state and territory. These breaches are highly evident with respect to psychosocial hazards. Contracts that, by their current design punish operators and therefore drivers for failure to meet on time running without accounting for traffic changes, congestion, and passenger safety. Contracts that fail to actively address workplace violence and contracts that promote unmitigated psychosocial hazards and are therefore illegal in nature.

The design of current contracts significantly impacts on the public perception of the bus industry and consequently, the attraction and retention of drivers. It was evident that the variation in bus contracts across Australia are on a continuum with the worst being a master servant relationship with draconian authoritarian contract management to consultative efforts towards best practice.

One exception, is Brisbane, where Translink develop contracts with their operators in partnership, and rather than have punitive measures of abatements or fines, their contract includes bonuses for successful contracts, promoting innovation and efficiency rather than fear.

The current master servant relationships have resulted in an unwillingness or fear to communicate and collaborate with the contract manager/Government. The competitive tensions have resulted in operators feeling helpless, and rather than innovate to solve problems they become punitive towards their drivers, consistent with the way they are treated by the Government. Record low margins that operators win competitive tenders on are being whittled away due to these master-slave working paradigms.

Best practice would address the entire life cycle of the contract from design, initiation and negotiation to execution, performance, renewal, or termination. This is not occurring consistently across Australia and does not foster open communication and collaboration between all stakeholders. The commuting public suffer as a result, as does the industry's workforce.

KEY INSIGHTS

The research underpinning this report has included over 120 hours of interviews with a cross section of the bus and coach industry including drivers, middle and senior managers in every state.

The research has identified a range of factors that significantly impact on drivers' job satisfaction, safety and therefore recruitment and retention of quality employees.

The following details key insights from the research.

Antisocial behaviour

Antisocial behaviour by passengers is widespread and a significant issue in all jurisdictions. Antisocial behaviour directed at the driver ranges from verbal abuse and yelling, disrespect if a stop is missed or the bus is late, spitting at drivers, throwing drinks/items towards or over the cage/ security screen, abuse regarding fare evasion, racism, sexism and physical violence. Other antisocial behaviours also includes smoking, vaping, graffiti, slashing of seats, etching of windows and other illegal activities occurring on the bus which the driver is often required to respond to and manage.

While antisocial behaviour is a societal problem, it has a real and perverse impact on bus and coach drivers. Drivers face violence alone, and often in isolated areas. There is limited data on the prevalence, incidence, and nature of assaults against drivers, but it is estimated that less than ten percent of violent incidents are reported whilst 43% of bus drivers in Australia experience physical assaults. [1].

In Queensland, this issue has significantly improved with the State funded introduction of Network Officers. In Western Australia the Government funds security officers at known antisocial hotspots.

Antisocial behaviour on and around buses should be addressed through visible and active transit police. It is not the responsibility of the driver to prevent passengers from injecting drugs on their bus, for example, nor should they be spat on and abused for doing their job. The high level of anti-social behaviour and the isolation experienced by drivers is a significant factor contributing to the poor gender diversity of drivers and poor retention rates in the industry.

Many drivers speak of the Daniel Morcombe effect and the Australian wide policy that all children should have access to public transport. This policy is having a perverse impact with young teenagers using public transport to attend parties and engage in anti-social behaviour, knowing the driver cannot refuse them entry. Driver's report picking up gangs of young teenagers to go to fights and other anti-social and illegal gathering despite assuming their parents would not support them attending. This situation increases the stress levels for our drivers.

While it is crucial to ensure that children should always be collected and taken home or to the appropriate drop off point, bus drivers should not be required to transport groups of children engaging in anti-social behaviours potentially to events that are illegal.

[1] Lincoln, R., & Gregory, A. (2015). Moving violations: A study of incivility and violence against urban bus drivers in Australia. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 2(1), 118-127. <http://www.ijessnet.com/vol-2-no-1-january-2015/>.

KEY INSIGHTS

On Time Running (OTR)

Research clearly articulates the significant role the driver has on the quality of delivery of the public transport service. However rather than including incentives to improve quality, most contracts across Australia have abatements or fines relating to failure to meet On Time Running (OTR) benchmarks.

On time running prevents/impacts on drivers' ability to:

- Address the unique needs of their passengers including the elderly, parents with prams and people with disability and other special needs
- Meet disability access standards
- Support passengers to ensure that they are safe
- Provide high quality customer service

On Time Running (OTR) Example 1

Johnny a local driver in a capital city explained that he had stopped, got out of his bus, and assisted a regular passenger onto the bus as they were struggling with their walking aid.

He reported that he ensured the passenger was settled in their seat before returning to his seat. Johnny stated that this intervention took approximately 3 minutes. He said later in the run he had a young mother struggle with a pram, and he waited for her to be settled in her seat and secured the pram before taking off. Again, he estimated this would have taken 3-4 minutes.

He stated that when he arrived back at the depot, he was met by his operations supervisor who gave him a verbal warning as he got up out of his seat and then was 5 minutes late for the trip. Johnny said that one of the reason he enjoyed his job is to see regular customers, but he is unable to help them and achieve his OTR requirements.

OTR sets drivers up for failure. Consistent with the population growth across Australia the traffic and congestion across major cities has significantly increased post COVID. However, it is reported that the on-time requirements are not appropriately updated.

On Time Running (OTR) Example 2

Johnny currently completes a run that takes him across a busy intersection known for bad traffic congestion due to road works. The OTR is not automatically updated to reflect these circumstances and hence, the operator needs to explain to the regulator or Contract Manager why any traffic issue occurred to avoid an abatement. Johnny reports that since the road works started, he has not been on time and as a result he states this cuts into his break period and he has not had his scheduled break in over 6 weeks as he tries to make uptime and revert to OTR.

Further pressures to OTR are the current poor behaviour of other drivers on the road. Post COVID reports of increased poor and illegal behaviour by other road users towards bus drivers occurs consistently. This includes aggressive driving, abuse from car drivers, not following the road rules such as pulling out in front of the bus and illegal use of bus lanes. The NHVR is currently addressing this issue through a social media campaign but further education of other road users to be respectful to bus drivers and follow the road rules needs to be addressed by State Governments as it is contributing to workplace stress.

Failure to meet OTR benchmarks leads to penalties for the employer and potentially disciplinary action against the driver. It also reduces the likelihood of drivers engaging positively with passengers and undermines those characteristics of the job that many drivers find intrinsically rewarding.

KEY INSIGHTS

The design of services

Public Transport contracts focus on providing peak services based on passenger need and passenger expectations. This means that drivers shifts are often 'split' which has a significant impact on the driver's experience. It can result in drivers being absent from home for 12- 14 hours a day and being paid for only 8 hours.

Due to the distance from home to the depot the researchers saw drivers sleeping in darkened rooms and/or sitting around in the depot. This was not the case in all depots. Some well-run depots where the drivers were given a car to drive home during their split shift or had organised the shifts based on the worker's needs were observed. In these cases, the rostering prioritised the needs and availability of the drivers to fill the roster "bottom up". This resulted in a highly engaged workforce with low turnover.

During interviews many drivers acknowledged that they often have a second job driving during the evenings and would sleep at the depot during their split shift. This is both unsafe and unsustainable and potentially in breach of fatigue regulations.

Punitive pressure

Drivers spoke of the impact caused by conflicting contract requirements/KPIs.

An example is the contractual obligation to meet a KPI which required operators to meet fare collection targets by reducing fare evasion.

Drivers are asked to assist in decreasing fare evasion and are trained in methods to increase fare collection as part of their role. Despite training, drivers reported that asking for fare payment leads to increased passenger complaints. However, a conflicting KPI relates to customer complaints as a proxy measurement for customer satisfaction.

Due to addressing the fare evasion KPI, drivers know they will subsequently fail their customer experience requirements.

Punitive pressure Example

Johnny is a driver who has undergone further training on how to approach passengers to seek payment in line with the contractual requirements for fare evasion.

Johnny diligently implemented the verbal request for payment in line with the training. As a result of his change in behaviour, he reported that complaints made against him increased significantly.

He subsequently was required to meet with the company customer experience manager and provide reasons as to why he had increased complaints.

Johnny explained that when you start asking passengers to pay either the fare evader gets angry or fellow passengers feel that the driver is inappropriately targeting disadvantaged passengers and make complaints.

KEY INSIGHTS

Barriers to entry: Obtaining a Drivers' Authority

Regulations in each jurisdiction create a barrier to entry into the industry. Currently it will take on average 6 weeks to gain a Driver's Authority (DA) if starting from a C Class license in NSW due to the State based licensing requirements to gain a Heavy Vehicle license.

It takes longer in Victoria for a Driver's Certificate to be issued. This is a significant imposition on employers and potential drivers. C Class drivers are an unattractive option for operators because of to the low retention rates due to poaching from other heavy vehicle industries once the license is obtained.

Barriers to entry example

Company recruited their own Heavy Vehicle trainer & assessor and recruits C Class drivers, putting them through a 4-week intensive paid training program to build skills and knowledge of driving. The success rate is 60 % with 40% of people failing their license, not because they don't have the skills but because they are nervous and/or the assessment for a Medium Ridge license is focused on truck drivers. It includes reversing and hitching a trailer, a heavy manual task that does not support gender diversity and is not required to drive a bus.

To rebook and make a second attempt is approximately another 4 weeks across Australia (longer in some places) and as a result operators terminate the worker at that stage as they do not have a job for them to complete in the hope that they will pass next time.

Of the 60% of drivers that pass, the company said approximately 50% then leave to gain work in logistics and heavy haulage.

This is due to:

- Higher wages in heavy haulage
- No need to deal with passengers
- The assessment is not specific to bus drivers. Therefore, the license enables them to also drive trucks and therefore gain employment within the heavy transport industry.

Health & fitness to work

There is no harmonised approach to assessing drivers' fitness to work. All states require a medical assessment, however this is different in each State and Territory and does not specifically address the ageing workforce adequately nor the health impacts of a sedentary role.

If a driver has a health condition that requires further investigation, the process is currently handled within the Medicare health system. This is difficult to navigate, leading to significant delays in obtaining appointments or tests, and usually resulting in significant out of pocket expenses.

As a result, high numbers of potential drivers find the barrier to entry too high and opt out. This impacts on both new drivers, ageing drivers and those with a health condition.

Specifically, the issue of morbidly obese drivers who are greater than 130 kgs and no longer rated to their ISRI seats and those with other comorbid conditions need to be addressed through strong policy and health support services.

KEY INSIGHTS

Wages and rosters

There are a number of factors that impact on the current wage and rosters that have a negative effect on recruiting and retaining drivers.

The current hourly wage rate for drivers whilst varied across Australia is consistently too low compared to other sectors/competitors for talent. A repeated example provided was that a barista or stop/go traffic controller was paid more than a bus driver in all states.

Bus drivers are essential frontline workers who provide crucial public transport services.

By improving their wages, government can acknowledge the importance of bus drivers and show a commitment to supporting the role these services play in connecting communities.

If governments are committed to making it easier and more attractive for people to catch public transport, it is crucial that we have the drivers in place to keep the system moving. Improving the conditions of drivers will make it easier to recruit and retain drivers, allowing frequent and reliable bus services.

The low hourly rate is compounded by the reliance on split shifts that interferes with time at home with families and/or social community engagement.

To this extent there needs to be urgent wage review to ensure that driver wages 'meet cost of living standards'. In Western Australia, Victoria, Tasmania in part, and in Queensland and previously in Victoria this has been recognised by the regulators with regular wage indexation taking place. Further;

- There are limited options for full-time positions as the industry has a long history of casualisation of the workforce particularly with school bus runs
- There is the perception of a high level of competency required to complete the role. That is, it is believed that it is hard to drive a bus and that it is much harder than driving a truck due to passenger demands, KPIs and the high value cargo of passengers. The wage is not consistent with the skills and risk-reward ratio
- Whilst driving is an ideal environment for transitioning to retirement, poor flexibility within the current Social Security rules act as a disincentive for those drivers on pensions to work more than 8 hours a week

In many cases current Enterprise Agreements are very restrictive in their ability to be flexible and allow for the opportunity for diversity and transition to retirement. This may be, because they restrict total casual or part time positions to be employed and the allocation of shifts to those positions. They are also cost ineffective by calling for any work hours beyond the contracted agreement (e.g. 25 hours) to be at overtime rates.

A tripartite approach may provide an opportunity to open up opportunities for half shifts (versus split) as a form of job sharing. This could make the job of driver more attractive to a wider range of potential employees including parents (particularly women/ mothers), transition to retirement employees seeking reduced work hours, and people wanting to have a steady base income as well as work the gig economy at hours of their choice etc.

This approach should be investigated and if supported by the tripartite framework changes could be made to existing EAs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The underlying premise of this manifesto, "Riding on the Same Bus" is that meaningful change and improvements to bus services and employees conditions can only be achieved through a tripartite approach.

Addressing a range of structural issues will help to alleviate the downturn in recruitment and retention of employees in the bus industry.

The following recommendations seek to address the key issues identified in the research and consequently create improved bus and coach services.

<p>Procurement process and contract types</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The franchising model for procurement across States and Territories should be underpinned by a tripartite framework with representatives from operators, workers, and whole of government to ensure that the design, implementation, and management of contracts is not punitive and drives improved outcomes for all stakeholders • Renewed contract negotiations should provide agreements which ensure that employees receive wages that keep pace with cost of living, that KPI's were not aspirational punitive but achievable, that government owned infrastructure was kept in good condition, that operators did not operate under a regime where fines became the main source of further revenue to government and that revenue was returned for the benefit of the contract region • Consideration should be given to the nature of contract renewal, particularly where an existing contractor has invested large amounts to upgrade infrastructure, especially as the industry transitions to zero emissions. Contract renewal based on performance should be considered in such circumstances • Price should not be the determining factor in choosing a successful tenderer. Quality, customer service and the workforce should take precedence over cost. This would allow for better wage, supervisor staffing ratios, and depot facilities
<p>Antisocial behaviour of passengers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments should address the anti-social behaviour with the appropriate funding of transit police and network officers as is currently used with significant success in Queensland • Consideration should be given to technological solutions to fare evasion. This should improve access and egress of passengers and driver job satisfaction. • Consideration be given to greater levels of CCTV to deter anti-social behaviour

RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Split shifts/OTR runs and route design</p>	<p>Through effective tripartism, governments, operators, and workers should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the current reliance on split shifts across peak services. The argument that it is required to meet peak passenger movement needs is flawed as is proven in the rail industry where train drivers work 8-hour shifts • Review the design and schedule of runs to ensure they are realistic and take into consideration the traffic and congestion and are not just designed to reduce dead running • Weight OTR evenly with complementary KPI's such as retention of staff, and other workplace culture KPI's • Develop KPI's that support quality & reward attainment rather than be punitive
<p>Harmonisation of licensing and fitness for work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State and territory governments should implement a harmonised pre- employment and periodical medical assessment as part of the Driver Authority to track and address comorbid conditions and build a robust system that ensures drivers gain the necessary health interventions and are appropriately monitored • The current licensing requirements to become a bus driver be harmonised Nationally and be tailored specifically for bus driving (not focused on trucks) • The current workplace modification assessment and employment assistance fund through Department of Social Services should be expanded to assist drivers with clearly identified health conditions arising out of ageing and obesity which is common with sedentary roles. The industry loses too many ageing men due to lack of workplace modifications of the 150 kg rated ISRI seats and the failure to provide wrap around health services to address their co morbid conditions • The Federal Government should consider an industry labour agreement by the Department of Home Affairs to access staff from overseas and address the current barriers to entry with respect to recognition of international licenses
<p>Wages and career pathways</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government and industry should introduce micro credentialing that identifies trains, and assesses all competencies required as a bus driver • The current wage needs to be reviewed in line with provision of an essential service and the high level of competency required • All TAFEs should update their curriculum to support Zero Emission Buses and promote buses as a viable career for mechanics • The Federal Government should consider a federal industrial award that outlines a skill matrix for drivers to encourage and support development of skills and tenure to increase earning potential. A skill matrix will ensure that more skilled drivers are appropriately remunerated • Review of the current EA's need to occur within a tripartite arrangement to assess how to introduce flexibility towards retirement, increasing the number of full time drivers and a structure that supports diversity

RECOMMENDATIONS

<p>Depot facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Government must adopt clear standards for fit for purpose depot facilities and cleanliness for both private and publicly owned depots. This needs to also include set standards for facilities for drivers to access when breaks occur within the community. To improve gender diversity effort is required to address the short comings of facilities at the depot level and within the community
<p>Local council</p>	<p>Local Councils should take a more active role in the development of better public transport by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auditing of bus stops with respect to lighting and safety and subsequent remediation to occur to ensure safety of passengers and drivers • Planning and traffic committee ensure that bus/coach operators are represented to ensure that new schools and developments meet turning bay and access requirements as well as set down areas and lay over provisions • Integration of bike racks within bus stops to support hybrid travel options
<p>Passenger safety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To address safety within buses and coaches including the wearing of seatbelts and dealing with anti-social behaviour, a national set of protocols should be negotiated via a tripartite approach, to ensure that the responsibility is shared with all participants • Governments need to embark upon a joint funding process to ensure that the public and operators are fully educated on their obligations to ensure the utmost level of safety on and around buses and coaches
<p>Essential service community awareness program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be a recognition of the essential nature of public transport and the value it creates for communities and the subsequent development of a community awareness program • A positive narrative need to replace the constant negative media stories and should highlight the public's dependence upon regular scheduled bus services • Governments should engage in policing and community awareness to promote adherence to road rules associated with bus lanes and overtaking buses • All state and territory governments should implement driver of the year and mechanic and apprentice of the year awards with subsequent media and PR coverage consistent with the Queensland approach

CONCLUSION

The research was able to identify that State and Federal Governments policies and actions contribute to the current poor culture of the bus and coach industry.

This manifesto recommends that both State and Territory Governments have the potential to significantly improve the recruitment and retention of drivers through adoption of a fair and sustainable contract management system underpinned by a tripartite framework.

Further policy changes and investment in strategies will address the structural problems currently facing operators and impacting on driver's job satisfaction.

Each operator also plays a role in reducing negative working conditions and have real opportunities within their sphere of influence to promote and support the positive aspects of the bus and coach industry whilst mitigating the current problems.

This manifesto is a fearless attempt to raise and call out "the elephants in the room" offering practical and reasonable steps to resolve the identified issues. Its goal is to ensure an improved bus and coach industry working conditions ultimately leading to improve recruitment and retention of staff.

And finally...

When it comes to driving a positive future for bus drivers, passengers, and the community, we all need to be Riding on the Same Bus. The bus industry is heading down a one-way street. It's on a path where we simply do not have enough drivers to keep this country moving and where the ones we do have are overworked, under appreciated and on track to depart the industry for good.

It's time to change direction. We need to unite and commit to significant, lasting changes to culture, working conditions for bus drivers and engender community respect for our drivers.

But we know it can only happen when government, unions, and operators are unified in a commitment to examine every part of our industry, reveal the truths and take the actions outlined in this manifesto that are necessary to make a real difference.

Because when it comes to driving a positive future for drivers, passengers, and the community, the bus stops here.

Are you on board?

FEARLESS

RIDING ON THE SAME BUS

The Riding On The Same Bus Policy Manifesto was authored by Nikki Britt (Occupational Therapist) with content and editorial contribution from Ian MacDonald and James Mitchell.

Nikki, Ian & James would like to acknowledge and thank all of the drivers, mechanics, and managers at depots, unions, government authorities and international industry associations, who honestly and fearlessly shared their experiences, ideas and frustrations with the hope of improving their industry.

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DISCLAIMER

The purpose of this manifesto is to provide information and a policy position with respect to the recruitment and retention of employees within the bus and coach industry. The issues raised in this manifesto are not intended to refer to any specific bus or coach operator or persons within the industry. The matters raised in this manifesto should not be relied upon without separate advice on the matters of interpretation and without reference to appropriate authorities and professional advice

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