

Time Management for Rural Transit Managers



Doesn't it seem like there is less and less time in the day to get everything done? Rural transit managers are increasingly finding their time stretched due to new regulatory and reporting requirements, new technological advancements, adapting operations toward more environmentally sustainable practices, and simply keeping up with the ever-expanding influx of information and communications. This technical brief will offer best practices and recommendations for time management for rural transit managers, as well as ways to increase productivity and reduce stress caused by task and information overload.

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What Takes Up Transit Managers' Time?

The answer is – everything! An “average” day in the life of a manager of a rural transit agency may include everything from testifying before elected officials, to reviewing proposals that came in for a new initiative, to figuring out how to safely transport passengers during a major disaster. And that’s in addition to the dozens, or even hundreds, of emails and other communications that flood transit managers’ desks daily.

According to Dain Giesie, Assistant Vice President, Business Development, Enterprise Fleet Management, the most disruptive setbacks are those a manager can't anticipate, like accidents and unscheduled repairs. Even unexpected growth or new projects can be challenging.

"Time management is really a misnomer -- the challenge is not to manage time, but to manage ourselves." **Stephen Covey**

“Anyone can be busy. All you need to do to feel busy is to try to get two things done at once—or seek to beat a deadline that is stressing you out. Productivity, on the other hand, has little to do with busy. Productivity requires bringing real skills to the table. Productivity is learned.”
Seth Godin

Dunn County Transit Commission Manager Dolly Catlin feels that it is not one specific thing that takes the most time, but it’s the myriad of details that transit managers encounter each day that shape their workload. An average day for her may include working with her agency’s board, preparing marketing materials, approving invoices, endorsing repairs, etc., all of which constitute extremely detailed work.

Regulatory Compliance

A study conducted in 2007 by the Small Business Research Board and the International Profit Associates found that 92% of small business owners in the transportation industry were spending more time complying with government regulations than they did two years ago. In the 13 years since then, there have been dozens more Federal Transit Administration (FTA) regulations and circulars that transit agencies receiving FTA funds must comply with.

Compliance is time-consuming because there is so much to understand and potentially perform differently in order to act in accordance with regulations. Regulatory documents themselves can entail hundreds of pages, are not usually reader-friendly, and often lead to more questions than answers.

Technical assistance organizations can help managers. National RTAP provides technical assistance in many formats – toolkits, webinars, technical briefs, etc. – and can provide direct answers via phone, email and chat. The National RTAP ProcurementPRO 2.0 web app quickly supplies the necessary federal clauses and certifications needed for any procurement using FTA funding. FTA also offers assistance through many sections of their website, including the National Transit Database and Public Transportation Agency Safety Planning. State DOT and State RTAP programs have specialists who can assist transit managers too. In addition, the National RTAP Find Anything Toolkit includes a page listing many additional resources, including compliance policies from State DOTs and State RTAP programs.

There are also compliance management software tools and online platforms that keep necessary documents in one place and track compliance and grant management processes. Many provide access to updates to regulations to continually monitor compliance.

Personnel Issues

Deborah Bach, Rural Transit Programs Supervisor for the New Mexico Department of Transportation, Transit and Rail Division, finds that one challenge to getting things done at the state program management level is that many programs are never fully staffed. Process knowledge that has not been widely shared can cause production gaps, should an individual on the team move on and need to be replaced. One successful strategy Bach has started is cross-training her staff so multiple team members have project training in order to keep things moving forward during change, reducing the need for Bach to step in.

Transit agencies are only as effective as their managers and staff. Effective delegation is a must for a productive agency. Managers should set clear expectations about what needs to be done by when and by whom, and provide their staff with the proper training and resources to get the job done. Regular informal walk-arounds and check-ins with staff can save time in the long-run by catching issues that come up before they have a chance to escalate.

When staff conflicts arise, or when some members of a team are not carrying their weight, managers should promptly schedule a meeting with the staff involved (possibly with human resources personnel in attendance) to resolve the issues quickly so that projects and daily operations can continue as planned.

Making Training Count

Onboarding and ongoing training are needed for transit staff at all levels. While it may appear to be difficult to take an hour, a day, or a few days away from the office to dedicate to training, it pays off in the long run through increased efficiency of agency operations and productivity. Researchers from the Transportation Learning Center found that an investment in transit training can provide a five to twelve times return on investment.

TCRP's Guidebook for Recruiting, Developing, and Retaining Transit Managers for Fixed-Route Bus and Paratransit Systems provides examples of rural transit agencies offering training that help managers save time:

- OATS, Inc. in Missouri gathers all managers for a monthly two-day meeting at their headquarters. The meeting has training built in so managers from different areas are all trained at the same time.
- OCCCK, Inc. in Kansas offers all managers and staff voluntary monthly and quarterly lunchtime training sessions (with lunch included).
- Coast Transit Authority in Mississippi offers extensive online management training.

When planning training, consider:

- Choosing a time that is most convenient for everyone concerned (evenings or weekends can even be considered if that works)
- Developing or selecting courses that allow learners to become proficient within the training time-frame allowed
- Utilizing self-paced, online training and eLearning that can be completed when the learner has time
- Assigning a mentor to a new hire to answer questions about the nuts and bolts of the job

Data and Information Overload

Time management author Peter Bregman tells the story of a new manager who arrived at work on the first day of her new job to be greeted by 385 emails in her in-box. By the time she worked through them, there were hundreds more.

More sophisticated data and more sources of statistics have become available for making management decisions, which has challenged agencies who lack the time and/or expertise to learn how to use data, assess it, and incorporate it into their processes. One organization found that it was tracking over 2,000 key performance indicators, leading to an excessive focus on short-term results and disjointed planning. They found a way to narrow the indicators they tracked to 30, which enabled managers to make better decisions based on the most effective information possible.

Electronic information and content aggregators such as Curator and Inoreader can collect emails and/or documents and compile them into one or a few folders or composite email messages. Subscribing to just a few of the major industry newsletters that capture the most relevant news to an agency is also a good practice. Librarians and knowledge managers, from organizations including National RTAP, National Transportation Knowledge Network (NTKN), and State DOTs, can assist managers with pinpointing and synthesizing the most relevant information needed to plan and complete projects.

Meetings and Communications Strategies

Frequent and regular discussions with staff and colleagues result in clearer communication and less confusion from unwieldy email trails. If a manager only has a few direct-report staff, brief weekly one-on-one meetings (about 10-30 minutes long) can be used to report on progress, set goals, and troubleshoot issues.

Time management experts recommend spending less time on email by writing shorter emails and using email only when it is the best means of communication. A rule to strive for is to try to limit

emails to five sentences or less, and if an email “chain” reaches five back-and-forth communications without any resolution, it is time to change strategies (pick up the phone, meet one-on-one, etc.)

Marc Shepard, a Tribal Technical Assistance Program (TTAP) course instructor, advocates an open-house style for meetings, when appropriate, where participants can circulate around a series of exhibits on a project, watch a short video presentation, and/or chat with staff and outside experts. Attendees can comment on the project in writing or provide input to staff at a comment table.

Regular staff, team, work group, and committee meetings can become highly productive by implementing a few simple ground rules:

1. Before the meeting, set a clear agenda containing topics, what needs to be decided or done, and action items that will be assigned to specific individuals.
2. The meeting organizer should determine the time-frame based on Step 1 (try to keep meetings under 1 ½ hours).
3. A “scribe” should take notes as the meeting occurs, or the meeting can be recorded. People probably will not remember who volunteered for a committee unless that is written down.
4. A meeting leader should be in place to politely interject people who rant or ramble with something like, “That’s a good point. We’ll take that into consideration. Now onto our next agenda item.”

While conferences and seminars are important for learning and sharing knowledge, and vacations are equally important for relaxation and rejuvenation, both result in time away from the office. While it would be nice to stop the barrage of emails and voicemails during the time away, that is wishful thinking. One solution may be to set aside a brief time in the morning or evening while away to attend to communications, so the rest of the trip could be focused on the conference or the vacation. Another solution could be to leave an out-of-office message to triage these communications to a trusted colleague or staff-person, who could attend to most of them while the manager is away, or at least get things started.

More Effective Project Management

Transit agencies run smoothly when policies, processes and procedures are in place to help employees do the best possible job. There are many tools that can help, from simple printed calendars to sophisticated online project management platforms. What a manager uses is a matter of individual preference, and it may take some trial-and-error to find the right fit. Many computers come with built-in calendars and task lists, and can sync with existing email, phone, and notes documents. Users can arrange their work by hours, days, weeks, or months and automate reminders. Others may find that a white-board on their office wall, where they can write their tasks and erase them when completed, fits better for their working style.

Large projects should be broken down into manageable steps. For example, anyone tasked with “Create a strategic plan for the agency” may find it hard to know where to begin. The National RTAP Transit Manager’s Toolkit Planning Section breaks this project into specific, tangible steps; here are the first three. Each of these steps can be completed within a specific and manageable time-frame.

1. Identify what elements should be included in the strategic plan
2. Set the timeline for completion of the plan
3. Identify stakeholders who should be included in the process

It is important for managers to access and leverage quality resources, so they do not have to “reinvent the wheel” for every new project. Templates and guidelines, such as the “Sample 5311

'Timeline for Apportionment & Budget' created for the Budgeting and Finance 101 section of the National RTAP Transit Manager's Toolkit by Curtis Sims, Jr., CSSO, Training, Safety/Security, and RTAP Program Manager in the Office of Public Transit at South Carolina DOT, break down a large project into clear and manageable steps.

Dolly Catlin has worked in rural transit for three years and has developed some helpful strategies for time management. "Tell yourself that a project will probably take a lot longer than you anticipate," advises Catlin. When she was working on a three-year capital project, she set aside blocks of uninterrupted time every three weeks to work on it. She also believes that if something comes up suddenly that may be advantageous for the agency (like a grant or a community building opportunity), one should make time for it. Catlin believes that transit agencies should always make time for marketing, which is about building connections with people in the community.

Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Authority Executive Director Julia Castillo echoes that sentiment. "Make time for marketing," recommends Castillo, "Chunk into bite sized pieces that you are more comfortable with and won't take as much time and resource to develop, and you can market quicker. Try scheduling 15 or 30 minutes each morning before you get into the day-to-day chaos of the day."

As a State RTAP Manager, Deborah Bach finds that she spends a majority of her time with questions and calls from individual transit agencies about day-to-day challenges. She also works on at least a half-a-dozen projects every day, as well as serves on the National RTAP Review Board. While it's constantly "crunch time" with little room for error, she has found that prioritizing projects by due date is the most effective approach. She also is not afraid to ask for a project extension, realizing that one or two days can make a drastic difference in the outcome of projects with a large cognitive load.

One project that Bach managed that took an extended period of time was a statewide vehicle price agreement. Her goal was to obtain input from multiple manufacturers and subrecipients regarding transit vehicle specifications and needs in order to more proficiently procure vehicles. In order to achieve her goal, Bach created a project plan with a timeline that prioritized each deliverable.

Project prioritization is an important skill and presents its own set of challenges. National RTAP's Roles and Responsibilities of Transit Managers reminds transit managers that while they must address immediate needs (such as "What vehicle needs to be repaired the most?" or "How can I get that extra person I need?"), an effective leader must stay focused on what counts – passengers. Use a proactive approach to spend less time simply reacting.

Nowadays, people want more and more and more. There are technological solutions out there, but cost and training time may be a barrier for small, rural systems. While technology such as an electronic grant management system can save valuable time by automating administrative tasks, Bach has found that technology learning curves can create more work for the transit managers who are often asked to provide technical support to the agency staff using the system.

Prepare for the Unexpected

While it is difficult enough to prepare for the everyday crises and interruptions that occur, incidents and emergencies can topple even the most well-intentioned plans. One transit manager was not able to meet a deadline because all her drivers were out sick with the flu at the same time, so guess who had to drive the bus? In National RTAP's Transit Disaster Response Twitter Chat, Florida RTAP staff discussed how a hurricane completely collapsed a public transit system, and that the area was still adjusting a year after the event.

Projects may become delayed due to factors beyond the manager's control. Dunn County Transit was awarded capital funding to work with the state of Wisconsin to purchase buses, but the project was delayed when a particular motor company stopped producing one model. Projects can also be delayed by changes in personnel, both within and outside of the transit agency.

There are situations people don't usually think about – if the staff person who usually shovels is out and it snows, someone else has to shovel. If a driver's car breaks down, someone else may need to drive him to the depot so he can drive the bus.

When time is of the essence, it is important to have a well-designed emergency management procedure in place, as well as the infrastructure and resources to make critical decisions quickly. Some helpful resources include National RTAP's Emergency Response Checklists, which succinctly define the responsibilities of Emergency Response Coordinators in emergency situations.

Top Ten Time Management Tips for Transit Managers

Here are ten practical recommendations to put into place now:

1. If it is an option, take transit to work. This may seem obvious to transit managers, but an hour on a bus or a train can be spent reviewing a document without interruption.
2. If funding is in place, consider outsourcing some agency functions unless they are necessary to retain in-house. Examples include human resources, information technology, and maintenance. There are consultants with expertise in practically anything, from creating transit asset management plans to developing statewide coordination initiatives, which could take some of the hands-on burden off the transit manager's hands.
3. Set an email notification for a deadline for each project that is a few days or a week before the actual deadline.
4. Try the exercise of keeping a time diary of daily average activities. At the end of a week, decide which time-consuming tasks can be delegated or handled in a different way.
5. Sometimes it is a good idea to just say "No" to requests if time and attention is needed elsewhere. There will probably be other opportunities to present at a webinar, but if hiring a new dispatcher is the focus right now, concentrate on that.
6. If something has been on your calendar or "to-do list" for more than a few days and hasn't been started yet, either start it immediately, schedule it for a specific time, delegate it if possible, or just delete it if it is no longer necessary.
7. Decide on the best strategy for managing the massive communications that arrive each day – email, phone calls and texts, and personal visitors. Establish specific times when these will be attended to. Use automation to feed informational emails (newsletters, announcements, etc.) and voicemails from multiple sources into targeted folders for later viewing or listening.
8. Don't schedule every minute of every day. Try to take breaks in between meetings and schedule quiet and uninterrupted periods for projects that require careful thought. National RTAP's Healthy Habits technical brief has information about how transit professionals can incorporate stress reduction and relaxation techniques into their work and lives.
9. Some people are self-motivated, but others may benefit from external rewards. There are apps that let users earn points for completing training, setting daily goals, and counting the consecutive number of days goals are reached. Agencies can even plan friendly competitions using apps or low-tech methods to reward team members who reach performance goals.

10. Everyone has a different work approach. If you admire people who seem to “get everything done,” ask them for some tips. And finally, congratulate yourself and your team when projects large and small are completed!

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