



A Day in the Life of a Bus Driver in San Francisco

(with Answers)

Getting started

Before beginning on the transit line, the operator must sign in and meet a dispatcher to receive the schedule, learn about any detours, etc. The operator then locates the assigned vehicle and has a mere 10 minutes to make a detailed safety check on the vehicle, set up its destination sign, adjust the seat and mirrors, and program the radio and fare boxes. If another bus is blocking the way out, a further delay may result. The first few minutes of operating the vehicle are the most precarious with regard to accident risk.

Drivers are responsible for the safety of their passengers and vehicle. Mass transit vehicles often handle poorly, brake slowly and, in the case of electric trolley cars, must be stopped only in locations where they will not lose contact with the overhead grid. Traffic is often heavy. Pedestrians have the right of way and may demand it under dangerous circumstances. There are often too many passengers and not enough buses. Drivers are frequently behind schedule and trying to catch up, and as a consequence, may not be able to take the prescribed breaks.

Stressors identified:

1. The dispatcher could be a source of encouragement and support. However, given the demands that both dispatchers and operators encounter in urban transportation, interacting with the dispatcher can be a source of additional stress even before the day's driving work begins.
2. The operator's "lifeline" - the communication system without which he or she cannot function – is a functional radio.
3. Drivers' seats are frequently worn down due to constant pressure to turn to the right side. Bus drivers' equipment is frequently old and worn.
4. If any of these components fails to perform properly, the time provided becomes insufficient.
5. If another bus is blocking the exit, there may be additional delays and stress.
6. Public transportation vehicles frequently have poor handling, delayed braking, and, in the case of electric trolley cars, must only be stopped where they will not lose contact with the overhead grid.
7. There is a lot of traffic.
8. Pedestrians have the right of way and have the right to demand it in dangerous situations.
9. Because drivers are constantly behind schedule and attempting to make up, they may be unable to take the required breaks.



This may result in excessive fatigue, leading to frayed nerves, poorer driving and more conflict with passengers.

Getting going

San Francisco's hills present a major difficulty for bus drivers, affecting visibility and creating difficulty in maneuvering. Significant muscle strength is required to hold the brakes on the downhill. San Francisco also has many narrow streets, not designed for heavy traffic. A double-parked car on a narrow street can be sufficient to cause a major traffic blockage. Having to make sharp turns with a large vehicle on these streets is challenging, slowing the driver down as well as presenting an accident risk.

A number of San Francisco's mass transit lines are equipped with trolley buses, connected to a power line by a pole, which can be displaced. When this happens along a narrow street traffic can become totally blocked. In the midst of the jam, the operator must get out of the vehicle and try to put the connecting pole back in place using a tension cable, a procedure requiring considerable physical strength. When the driver tries to put the pole back in place quickly while standing in the midst of congested traffic, arm and shoulder injuries can easily occur.

The magnificent panoramas that dominate San Francisco's landscape mean that transit operators must shut off part of their visual attention system in order to continuously monitor the traffic situation. A natural way for drivers to recover at the end of the line would be to step out of their vehicle and have a chance to enjoy San Francisco's unique panoramas. Indeed, it has been recommended that city bus drivers have at least a 20-minute break after each 2 hours behind the wheel.[i] Yet, transit operators often are unable to take even the short break that is scheduled at the end of each driving tour. When the driver reaches the end of the tour behind schedule, back-up is seldom, if ever, available. Knowing that passengers for the next tour are waiting, getting more impatient by the moment, most drivers opt to skip or at least shorten their break, an attempt to ameliorate passengers' impatience, and to try to get back on schedule.

...and not going

Minimum conditions for hygiene are frequently lacking at rest sites. Restrooms for drivers, often ill-maintained, are mainly found along the route itself, requiring an unscheduled stop. In addition to the discomfort and inconvenience of this situation, there are potential health consequences for the drivers, such as risk of urinary tract infection, from insufficient toilet breaks, and dehydration from not drinking enough fluid because of the insufficient toilet breaks.

Stressors identified:

1. Due to awaiting passengers and being behind time, drivers frequently forego part or all of their break.



2. This means that the driver foregoes his or her own comfort, as well as his or her long-term health and well-being, in order to compensate for the city's traffic congestion and a shortage of drivers and automobiles.
3. When a pole is displaced, drivers must reposition it while risking injury.
4. Bus drivers in San Francisco have significant challenges due to the city's hills and small roadways.
5. A single double-parked car on a narrow street can result in a massive traffic jam.
6. Rest rooms frequently lack the bare minimum in terms of hygiene.
7. Health issues caused by a lack of hydration and not enough restroom breaks.

Time squeeze

San Franciscans rely on public transportation and expect punctuality. Passengers may enter the bus already upset by long waits and being late for their appointments, etc. A transit operator can be cited if a passenger complains. The city's urban transit operators have received bad press, not unusual for transit operators around the world.

Simply getting people on and off at each stop is a time-consuming challenge for drivers. Passengers often fail to realize how important it is for them to move to the rear to keep the driver's view clear. No one wants to be left behind because the bus is over-crowded, and invariably it is the driver who bears the brunt of passengers' anger when this situation arises. Asking people to move back in the bus and explaining why no more passengers can come on costs the driver time and energy. As well, unruly passengers may congregate in the back of the vehicle. Thus, while following the traffic situation the driver must also keep an eye on behavior at the rear of the bus, a difficult task that can compromise passenger safety.

Inexorable time pressure is a fact of daily life for the urban transport operator, whose life becomes governed by the clock and is measured in time units of minutes. Waking for morning rush hour passengers often means rising at very early hours – sometimes 2 or 3 AM. Scrupulously punctual drivers, fearful of not hearing the alarm, report sleeping lightly or not at all in anticipation of this early, strictly defined waking time. Running late – often not the fault of the driver – will compromise or eliminate the already short rest break usually scheduled at the end of the line. If the schedule is more severely compromised, punitive measures may be taken. The driver is continuously pressing to catch-up with the schedule.

Stressors identified:

1. Passengers who are already irritated by long delays and being late for appointments, etc. board the bus.
2. It takes time and energy for the driver to ask individuals to return to the bus and explain why no more passengers can board.
3. As a result, the driver must keep an eye on behavior at the back of the bus while following the traffic situation, a difficult task that may jeopardize passenger safety.



4. Their lives are now dominated by the clock and are measured in minutes.

Violence on the job

Varying in degree from one urban center to another, the threat of violence is a common and major stressor for transit operators, who are vulnerable to violent attack at any moment. Drivers being robbed at knife or gunpoint are not uncommon events. The social problems of urban society are often manifested in hostile acts directed against the transit operator; carrying cash and transfers increases their vulnerability. Besides physical danger, frustrated persons often verbally vent their rage at the transport operator. They may complain about the bad conditions in the vehicle itself, about which the driver is well aware but which s/he cannot control. The urban mass transit operator has to be a pseudo psychologist to anticipate and handle all kinds of people and their troubles, and to devise coping strategies to minimize disruption from these complaints.

However, interaction with the public is also a source of satisfaction and gratification, explaining why suggestions for constructing compartments to separate the operator from the public in numerous settings, including San Francisco, have met with nearly universal opposition. Drivers expressed that this would create a sense of isolation and alienation.

Stressors identified:

1. Knife or gunpoint robberies of drivers are common.
2. Disgruntled passengers frequently verbally vent their rage at the driver.

Constant vigilance

Even under ideal circumstances, professional driving requires a high degree of vigilance to avoid accidents. The driver must continuously follow a barrage of incoming signals, to which s/he must be prepared to rapidly respond. A momentary lapse of attention, or even a seemingly slight error or delayed response could have potentially disastrous consequences. For the urban transit operator this burden is much greater than for an amateur driver. For example, s/he must watch right-left-right-left before making any move, whereas the amateur driver usually makes just three visual direction shifts. An eye must be kept open for oncoming and exiting passengers and anyone at the side of the curb. There is a need to watch on the right far more than for amateur drivers. This can be one of the factors contributing to the high rate of neck and other spinal pain among bus drivers, which is associated with number of years in the occupation. Furthermore, in situations where an amateur driver would brake (or quickly change lanes or make another rapid maneuver), the urban mass transit operator must think about the fact that people are standing, including frail passengers and people unsteady on their feet, and must try to maneuver accordingly. These dilemmas are not always resolvable. If someone falls inside the vehicle, the transit operator is held liable. It should be noted that anyone could stagger onto the bus, unstable on his feet, etc. requiring yet additional vigilance for the transit operator. The biggest worry is always about an accident, whether big or small. Even a seemingly trivial accident may result in injuries to passengers.



Stressors identified:

1. The driver must constantly monitor a barrage of incoming signals and be ready to react quickly to them.
2. In instances where an inexperienced driver would brake, an urban mass transport operator must consider the fact that people are standing, including fragile passengers and persons who are shaky on their feet, and adjust accordingly.
3. The greatest concern is always an accident, no matter how minor.

(Wigger, 2015)

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