



Saskatoon Transit's Cultural Shift: Getting Staff Buy-in to Adopt New Technology

Saskatoon Transit

Bus

Intelligent Transportation Systems

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Cory Shrigley,
Customer Support &
Engagement Manager,
Saskatoon Transit

When Saskatoon Transit in Saskatchewan, Canada decided to upgrade its Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) technology, they embarked on more than a technological change – they set out to change their culture and make sure employees have the right tools to provide accurate information to riders, instantaneously. By using the latest ITS technology, they facilitate a seamless journey for passengers riding transit. Here's how they did it.

Background

At the time of Saskatoon's initial investment in ITS to manage real-time operations, they significantly improved operational visibility for dispatch and customer service staff.

But as ITS systems evolved, it became clear to Saskatoon staff what was missing from their initial platform: proactive dispatch tools that allowed them to quickly visualize, internalize, and react to service disruptions, while providing Saskatoon Customer Service staff with real-time tools that could immediately help transit customers.

400+
employees

150
buses

1,500
bus stops

9.3M
annual ridership

Challenges

A common occurrence at Saskatoon Transit used to look like this: a passenger expected bus 898 to arrive at 10:05 at stop 8111. When they arrived at that stop, they saw no bus in sight – until 10:20. They called in and complained, or sent a frustrated tweet, and the Customer Service staff had to figure out a response. Perhaps they called the driver. Perhaps they looked at the day's schedule to see if the bus was supposed to arrive at that time. Or worse, they let the customer know they didn't have an answer right now and would need to follow up once a supervisor could be reached. Without real-time data that everyone in the organization could access, they couldn't solve the complaint.

“We had a problem where people didn’t want to answer a customer’s question, they wanted to get a supervisor to deal with it,” said Cory Shrigley, Customer Support & Engagement Manager at Saskatoon Transit. “We knew we weren’t using all the benefits of TransitMaster yet.”

They were a long-time user of Vontas’ ITS, but their initial system was out-of-date since Vontas had upgraded their ITS, TransitMaster, to provide more functionality to their customers, and Saskatoon hadn’t upgraded yet. This made it difficult to have that real-time information that not just Dispatch could see but that someone in Customer Service could access and use to solve customer complaints, ultimately ensuring people were satisfied with their service.

Solutions

Saskatoon migrated to the upgraded TransitMaster system and gained real-time data so they can answer passengers’ comments and complaints in minutes – without having to escalate them to a supervisor.

In fact, in the example mentioned earlier, the result now looks very different. After receiving a complaint like that, the Customer Service Staff could use TransitMaster’s GPS-enabled real-time data and view the video showing that bus 898 was at stop 8111 on-time. They can respond to customers in minutes with real information, rather than anecdotal information. They can even attach video playback to the comm report – enabling them to close-up complaints faster.

As a result, staff are confident in the information they’re giving to passengers; passengers are confident that when they inquire with Customer Service, they get an accurate response, quickly; supervisor escalations are nearly a thing of the past; and Saskatoon has significantly decreased the number of complaints.

“Our customer service staff can answer customers’ questions in minutes,” said Shrigley. “Now, we can provide hard evidence rather than just anecdotes.”

Another example of improved operations is during a detour. When dispatch is notified of a detour, they simply use point and click functionality of a MAP in Dispatch to draw the detour, and automatically publish the detour information to operators and customers alike (GTFS and social media). Utilizing proactive route monitoring tools, Schedule Adherence Administrators now can proactively manage OTP for key routes and corridors.

With regards to on-time performance, they love being able to see in real-time what’s going on with a bus at that exact moment and fix issues before they turn into larger escalations.

“Nothing makes people angrier than sitting on a bus waiting to go somewhere when you’re stopped so we’re working on utilizing TransitMaster to maintain more consistent travel speed,” said James McDonald, Director, Saskatoon Transit. “We want to get to a more headway-based approach. We’re trying to change the culture with drivers and enforce vehicles being constantly in motion, rather than racing to the next stop and then having to wait and stop, which is really frustrating for a customer. We have a high percentage of passengers using transit apps on their journey, so time adherence by stop specific is becoming more important – it’s not just about OTP overall, but being on time at each specific stop.”

Results



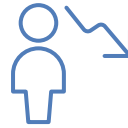
FEWER
early buses



MORE
reliable service



IMPROVED
customer experience



SIGNIFICANT DROP
in complaints

Although technology is at the heart of it all, change management has also been a key success factor in improving their customer experience.

With their new data, they are empowering drivers to think about OTP and their roles differently. This new approach has led to fewer early buses and more reliable service for passengers.

“It’s a culture change that started at the supervisor level. A few supervisors made calls that day, to operators on the road and said this is important, we’re going to be following up with you. We just started to move towards what we knew was practical for our customer base,” said McDonald.

They’ve already started to see the results. “This time of year compared to last year, our loads are lighter, we have more layover time, and we’re not seeing as many early buses as there had been before.”

It begins with getting buy-in from your team early. “You don’t change culture by hiding the fact that you want the culture to change, you change it by saying this is what we expect to happen and then monitoring and following up with that you expect.”

“On the IT side, we made sure to get all equipment working with the implementation of TransitMaster in all buses, so instead of operators saying it doesn’t work, they saw it worked. We also emphasized proper log on and log off, especially for late pull-outs. It’s basic, rudimentary steps but we identified them as a key to successful operations.”

Having the right tools at their disposal, coupled with a desire to spark change within their organization, makes Saskatoon a great example of how a transit agency can continuously improve and make it easier for passengers to want to ride transit.

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