



# Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

## Driver Interviews: Not Just for Finding Qualified Candidates

By Peter Schauer

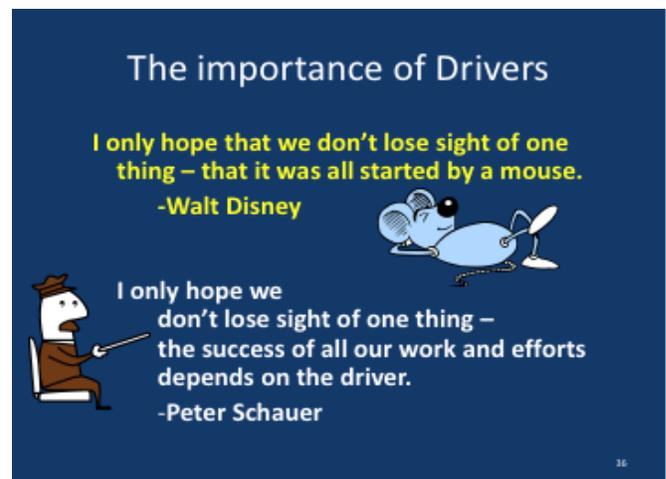
*Most people think the only reason to interview a prospective driver is to find a person qualified to drive vehicles. That's one reason, but you can accomplish more than that. This article explains three reasons to conduct an interview for the overall benefit to your agency, and provides answers to some of the most-frequently asked questions by transit managers about interviewing for new drivers.*

**T**he most important people in any transit service are the drivers. Without safe, qualified, customer-focused transit drivers, no service can survive. Most of the work of transit drivers is done without direct supervision; meaning you cannot give corrective guidance for the bulk of the work. Speaking metaphorically, when you hire a driver and send her or him out with a vehicle, you are providing a store with a complete inventory with no way for you to always watch the store or know what is happening to the inventory. This means an agency must hire drivers with good work habits and who are self-motivated to serve your customers in all the best ways.

I have found that few transit managers will say they have enough great employees who have good work habits and are reliable, safe, and give great customer service. Fewer still will say they have enough time in the day to find and train new employees. So it is important to allocate your management time wisely and think beyond “hands on the steering wheel” when interviewing drivers. With a carefully constructed interview plan—with thoughtful questions and a good interview team—you have a better chance of hiring the right people now who will require less time from you later in training and trying to improve job attitudes and customer service skills.

### Three reasons to conduct an interview

**1) Hiring:** Finding the person with the skills you need. Your primary objective is to find people who have the skills necessary to do the job, are a good fit for your agency, and have positive attitudes towards the work at hand. But it's also helpful to have some of your interview questions address two other service aspects: training and marketing.



*As with Disney and his success, we must never lose sight of one thing:  
The success of all our work and effort depends on the driver.*

**2) Training:** What training will this applicant need? The interview needs to hint at what will be covered in a training program and assess the prospect's “trainability,” so that when the training program begins, concepts have already been introduced and you know the trainee will be on-board.

**3) Marketing:** Sharing the word about transit. An interview that paints an upbeat, attractive picture of the job and the workplace, along with the importance of the work, can create believers in your service who will spread the good word about your service even if they don't get the job.

### Frequently-asked questions about the interview process

Over the years, I've been asked many questions about how to structure interviews and best practices for hiring qualified bus operators. Here are a few of those questions. And here are my responses for structuring interviews for the best outcomes—for the agency, the customer, the applicant and the community.

**Q: “I understand the concept of making sure a person is qualified to drive, but could you explain more about the concept of “interviewing for training” and “interviewing to create a believer in your service?”** I think everyone knows when you interview and screen prospective drivers, they must possess certain qualifications concerning the ability to drive safely and being part of a team, but prospective drivers must also be trainable in your style of driving and your style of service.

In the interview, ask questions that assess what a driver knows about defensive driving and customer service. That will give you guidance on what you have to emphasize in training to get him or her up to your desired level of proficiency.

It is critical to involve the people who do your training in the development of the interview questions. Let your training people add questions to your interview plan and, if possible, have them be part of the interview team.

When I interview prospective drivers I always make sure there is time in the interview to describe to them how the service positively impacts the community and how the elderly, persons with disabilities, and job seekers benefit from the services. When consulting, sometimes I encourage transit systems to give all interviewees complementary bus tickets along with a schedule and a brochure about the service. The object is to create “sneezers” (people who spread the good germ about the good things your service does). I always want people to leave the interview and go home and tell others about the good things a service does.

The best drivers love their job and understand that their work makes the world a better place. Building those positive feelings (which, by the way, make all the difference in customer service) starts in the interview. If an overly formal and high-stress interview is conducted, with emphasis on agency rules and pay scales, the “love” necessary for success likely will not be established.

On the other hand, be careful in the interview to not oversell the job. Realism is important to avoid the “I –F –D” Syndrome (Idealization, Frustration, Demoralization). When the daily required paperwork or some of the normal difficulties of any position come into play, a driver may become frustrated, demoralized, and even quit or get fired, if not given a realistic picture of the job in the first place. So, in the interview paint a positive picture of the benefits of driving a transit bus, and also share some of the challenges a driver might expect in day-to-day work.

**Q: “Okay I understand that when we interview we should have three goals in mind—finding a person with the skills we need, discovering what training a person will need and sharing the good that our service does— but what are the general areas we should focus on?”** Each transit service will have its own specific areas of focus in the interview, but here are six primary areas I recommend to cover in a comprehensive, thoughtful interview plan.



## Rating Interview Answers

To help make your interview process consistent for all applicants, a quantitative measurement is helpful. Each answer should be rated from excellent to unsatisfactory, and the questions deemed more important should be assigned a greater weight. For instance, an “Excellent” answer on attitudes towards work may be worth 10 points and for sense of humor 2 points, but every question should have some sort of grade for the answers. Quantitative assessment of answers helps justify why one person was hired and another person was not. The point system helps to avoid bias in the interview process.

As an example, here are two questions that fit the areas of safety and knowledge of driving techniques. Consistent with a systematic approach, these questions prime the prospective driver for training sessions on safety and defensive driving:

1. Name three defensive driving techniques.  
No answer: Points = 0  
One tip: Points = 1  
Two tips: Points = 3  
Three tips: Points = 5
2. If the steering wheel were a clock, at what time do you put your right and left hand for best control of the vehicle?  
No answer: Points = 0  
5 and 7 or 11 or 1: Points = 1  
4 and 8: Points = 2  
10 and 2: Points = 5

- Understanding of the job and your transit service.
- Approach to job and work habits (focus, self-management, attendance, team spirit and relationship with others, honesty and ethics).
- Attitudes towards safety and knowledge of safe driving techniques.

- Knowledge of streets/sites in your service area.
- Customer service (attitudes toward older persons, persons with disabilities, and other populations likely using transit, knowledge of customer service techniques, and techniques to apologize for something that is not their fault.)
- Sense of humor.

In working with transit services across the United States, I have found that the area that gets the least attention in interviews is customer service. And as most managers know, the most frequent complaints about drivers are about customer service. Therefore it is important to get a sense of how a potential driver would defuse customer problems or address people with special needs.

Unfortunately, almost no transit service assesses a person's sense of humor in the interview. This flies in the face of the Chinese proverb, "Don't open a shop unless you like to smile." I mentioned previously that sending a driver out in a bus is like giving them a shop with inventory, so you will do well to hire a "shop keeper" who smiles easily and has a sense of humor. I am not talking about telling jokes. I am talking about a healthy outlook on life with the ability to smile and take life as it comes without being dour or mean-spirited about the bumps in the road of life or the bumps in your service.

**Q: "You mentioned the need for an interview plan. What are some specifics of an interview plan?"** Each question in your interview plan should be created with careful thought and have a rating scale to quantify answers. (See sidebar on page 2 for some examples of rating answers.)

Questions should follow from the list of topics I previously mentioned, and any others of your choosing. Ideally, all questions should be reviewed by a Human Resources expert to make sure no question violates laws and regulations about discrimination and fair play.

**Q: "You have given some broad guidelines on interviewing potential drivers and how to make an interview plan, but can you give us some specifics or tips on hiring drivers that we can consider?"** I always try to hire a driver with a good work attitude and a good customer service attitude. I worry less about driving experience because I feel most people under proper supervision can be trained to operate a bus or van.

**Q: "How many people and what positions would make an ideal interview team?"** For small transit agencies, having more than one person available do an interview can be a problem, but ideally I like to have at least two people on an interview team, and preferably three. The three people I recommend are: 1) The person who is ultimately responsible for the driver: i.e., the general manager or operations manager; 2) The person who trains your drivers (a full-time trainer or a lead experienced driver); and 3) in a large system, an administrative staff person from Human Resources; in a small system, the individual who

handles paperwork, such as the office manager.

A good interview plan is one in which each member of the interview team:

- Knows in advance which questions they will ask,
- Does not significantly vary from the questions as written, and
- Has training in which questions cannot be asked (e.g., religion, marital status, national origin).

With training, just about any transit service employee can be part of the interview.

I believe strongly in a minimum of a two-person interview team so impressions and scores on the interview plan can be shared. As the saying goes, "Two heads are better than one, as long as they are not on the same person."

### In sum

Take time to create a good interview plan for your prospective drivers. It will pay off in a number of ways for your agency and community.

*Peter Schauer, principal, Peter Schauer Associates in Boonville, Missouri, gave a presentation titled "Not Just for Finding a Qualified Candidate: Three Reasons to Conduct an Interview and How to Construct an Interview Plan" at the Transportation Research Board Rural and Intercity Bus Conference held in October 2014 in Monterey, California. Peter Schauer was the first general manager of the OATS bus service in Missouri. He directed the growth of OATS from three buses to 150 buses and still consults with and advises the now 800 bus service. In his OATS position, he hired many drivers and trained other OATS employees on how to hire drivers. He has advised transit services throughout the United States on how best to hire and train bus drivers. For questions, or more information about interviewing and hiring transit drivers, contact peter@peterschauer.com.*

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