

Leading Lights in Light Rail



Dr Stephen Fletcher, occupational psychologist and director at the OPC talks about innovative and enlightening work from major Light Rail organisations that are best practice across the sector and for the wider rail industry



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The Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC) and its sister company OPC Assessment have been working with light rail organisations for over 15 years. Their experience extends to Tram Operations and Light Rail organisations both in the UK and internationally, including Australasia and the Middle East. During that time, they have been able to undertake some leading edge and innovative consulting programmes designed to help improve business efficiency, effectiveness and safety performance. This article explores two areas of their light rail consultancy work; the first focusing on recruiting safe and effective employees; and the other focusing on redesigning an organisation along with new jobs.

Helping to recruit the best, safest and effective light rail employees

Our light rail employees have a critical role to play in determining the effectiveness and safety of our light rail organisations. A key focus needs to be on talent acquisition of employees who match the job requirements and can undertake their roles effectively, efficiently and to the highest safety standards.

Many light rail clients have drawn on the OPC's expertise to help recruit the best employees and identify those who may be unsuitable or who may struggle to perform the role to the required safety standard.

A key, and leading-edge piece of job profiling work in the light rail sector was undertaken with Tram Operations Ltd to review the effectiveness of their recruitment

and selection processes for their tram drivers.

One of the first and most important building blocks in this process was that of job profiling. Job profiling is all about analysing a role to identify the key Non-Technical Skills (NTS) that will be required by a successful employee. These NTS might include abilities e.g. the ability to concentrate; or interpersonal characteristics e.g. the propensity to assert yourself, and motivational qualities i.e. an inclination towards personal development and continuous learning.

Andy Wallace, Head of Safety at Tram Operations Ltd told us "The role of tram driver differs to that of a mainline driver. There can be more recurring tasks, but which are essential for safe operation. It also carries an entirely different set of risks which may often be much more dynamic in

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nature due to the mixed traffic and pedestrian environment that trams operate in. Following a review of our recruitment processes we wanted to ensure that the selection tools and processes we were using were the best fit according to the high standards required by our organisation.

'In order to do that, going back to the basics of job-profiling was essential. The profiling work was also enhanced by using findings from some previous incidents and a review of the types of hazards some of our drivers were experiencing.'

Once a job profile has been drawn up and authenticated, the OPC uses this intelligence to design a safe and effective selection process that can include psychological tests, interviews and/or role plays. For example, we may suggest tools specifically for assessing

concentration, trainability and/or safety behaviours for a tram driver role, or a role play for customer service jobs. Once assessment tools have been recommended then the organisation is able to implement them as part of a new talent acquisition process.

Andy Wallace went on to say 'We've worked with the OPC for a number of years. We wanted to be absolutely confident we were using the right set of assessment tools and we had a process that could help predict the right kind of candidate for our safety-critical roles. At the moment, due to the pandemic, it's a bit difficult to see clear statistical outcomes, but we are going on to validate the process. This piece of profiling work was really affirming and has given us a greater assurance that our newly recruited drivers really are safe on the job.'

What hard evidence is there that a selection process is really working?

It's not uncommon for recruiters to implement an assessment and selection process for a key role and then continue to use the same process indefinitely.

However, a key question for psychologists is, do we really know if the assessment process is working? Is there clear evidence that shows a link between performance on the assessment tools and successful performance in both training and on the job, especially safety performance? This is what psychologists refer to as validation.

Unfortunately, in the OPC's experience this is rarely done. However, when it is undertaken the results can be very enlightening. Validation can improve and enhance the selection process still further. For example, we may find some assessment tools are very effective in predicting future performance. So, these tools can be given more weight in the selection decision. Other tools may be less effective, so we can either give them less weight or replace/remove them completely. This validation helps refine and improve a selection process and can help increase the chances of recruiting the best candidate into the role.

Tram Operations Ltd





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Leading the way: validating the tram driver selection process for a major light rail organisation

OPC psychologists have worked alongside another major light rail organisation to help them validate their tram driver selection process. A number of OPC Assessment's tools were used as part of their selection process – the SCAAT (<https://www.theopc.co.uk/assessment/test/scaat>) and the RAAT (<https://www.theopc.co.uk/assessment/test/raat>). They found strong statistical links between performance on the SCAAT and the RAAT used at selection and driver's subsequent performance in training and safety performance on the job.

This validation study provided confidence and reassurance that its selection process for tram drivers was indeed fit for purpose and was helping to recruit drivers that were easy to train and less likely to have safety incidents on the job.

The OPC is using these findings and is currently working with another light rail operator to undertake an identical validation process for their tram driver's selection process. Using historical psychometric test results from drivers recruited over many years they are analysing the data to find potential links with actual safety performance on the job.

Job profiling and validation work doesn't just apply to tram drivers. It can be applied to other key roles such as revenue protection officers, customer service roles, apprentices and controllers.

Validating your selection processes can provide real benefits

There are real benefits to undertaking validation work. Although it may take time to do the initial validation analysis, in the long run it is a time-saving, as organisations are more likely to recruit better quality candidates. There are also clear cost benefits to this in terms of recruitment time and frequency; plus, staff retention and importantly, improved individual and organisational safety performance.

Additionally, if a light rail organisation is challenged at law regarding the fairness of its selection process then the results from a validation study can play an important

role in supporting and justifying the use of the selection tool and the organisation's selection decision. Validation evidence can also be called into play if an employee has a safety incident e.g. whilst driving a tram

Andy Wallace, Head of Safety, from Tram Operations Ltd said 'As an organisation we wanted to raise the bar and our recruitment pass levels for tram driver roles, but we didn't want to do so at the expense of our fairness and diversity policy. Validation is a clear way to ensure this.'

Leading the way: using psychological expertise to help redesign a light rail organisation and its job roles

Light rail organisations change, develop and grow just like any other organisation. This is particularly the case in the UK light rail sector where tram companies have grown and continue to extend their networks. One of the challenges for many light rail organisations is how to ensure that any changes and developments they implement are fit for purpose, effective and most importantly safe.

OPC psychologists had the opportunity to collaborate with another forward-thinking light rail organisation that was

implementing tram trains onto its network. They were keen to ensure that the new organisational structure, its processes and job roles were efficient, effective and safe, particularly in light of the cross-over from road to rail track. OPC psychologists worked alongside job experts to map out all of the key tasks, activities and organisational processes that would be required to operate the tram trains including operations, control, maintenance and engineering. They supplemented this work with extensive scenario testing to check it was really robust.

Once the mapping and scenario testing were complete the organisation used all the intelligence to design, adapt and update its organisational processes, procedures, tasks and activities. This included the development of new jobs, profiles and the adaptation of existing roles as part of their talent acquisition process too. The outcome was a light rail organisation that evolved into a strong and safe state ready to implement its tram trains effectively, efficiently and safely.

As a final reflection, Dr Stephen Fletcher said 'The tram-train project was pretty unique. In over 25 years I have only worked on a handful of projects where rail clients have drawn on our expertise to help design or redesign their organisation and the accompanying job roles. There can be real tangible benefits to drawing on the expertise of occupational psychologists to help with organisational growth and change. The independent psychological principles, and research and statistical methods they bring can be applied to improve organisational functionality, performance, safety and satisfaction.'

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