

Special skills ... or just special people? What makes a really outstanding train driver?

Dr **Stephen Fletcher**, Director and Psychologist at the OPC shares research into what makes an outstanding train driver and why some drivers' performance is head and shoulders above the rest.



We all know someone who is excellent in their role, or we can remember someone who was just amazing at their job – someone who was really exceptional, not just average. We can recall things that made them really stand out like; they went the 'extra mile'; they cared deeply about the people they worked with or customers and showed it on a daily basis. Nothing was too much trouble for them.

The Occupational Psychology Centre (OPC) has been working with drivers and train operators for nearly 30 years, and in that time, they have worked with some exceptional drivers. They also regularly hear from clients that they want to recruit the 'very best drivers' from a pool of talent. So, because one of the OPC's specialist skills is helping select the absolute right person for a role, they set about researching what makes the outstanding driver and developing assessment tools to help recruit them.

Research into what makes an outstanding driver.

The people who see what an outstanding driver looks like are those who work with them every day, so doing research amongst job experts was going to yield the best data. The OPC approached five separate train operators and recruited job experts to take part in their research. The experts came from roles such as driver managers/team leaders, driver instructors and also some hand-picked exceptional drivers too.

The six defining characteristics of outstanding drivers.



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There were three stages in the research. Firstly, the job experts from each train operator were asked to identify a set of unique characteristics that made a driver outstanding for their organisation. Secondly, the OPC amalgamated these unique characteristics, identifying the consistent themes across all the operators. Finally, the OPC developed a set of all-encompassing characteristics for the outstanding train driver. This was undertaken using a range of job profiling techniques.

Once the OPC had completed all the job analysis they did in-depth scrutiny of the information. The data was collated and broken down; picking out key skills utilised, actions taken, specific behaviours and motivations shown. This ensured an inclusive, generic and universal set of competencies and behaviours.

What did the job profiling reveal?

There were six key competencies identified and a further 12 subscales relating to the key characteristics of an excellent or outstanding train driver. i.e., a driver who is not just 'average', but who is excellent in the role. So, what do these six competencies look like for our outstanding drivers on the job?

Displays the confidence to be self-sufficient and challenge wrong decisions when necessary.

An outstanding driver is an individual who possesses the optimum balance of confidence and assertiveness. A positive behaviour seen is that of quiet confidence in their own knowledge and ability.

Consequently, they feel able to act in an independent way. If an issue arises, they will feel self-sufficiently confident to act appropriately without having to wait for intervention or guidance from a driver manager unless required to do so.

The outstanding driver demonstrates a strong sense of right and wrong – integrity; and acts accordingly, never following others blindly. If they know something is unsafe, they will flag it and ensure best practice is followed. They will question decisions if they feel they aren't right or safe. They don't follow or engage in 'mess room' gossip. They aren't impressionable and will show self-will and determination to do the right thing at all times.

Responsibility for their own actions and demonstrates self-awareness.

The outstanding driver possesses a realistic view of their own job performance. They are able to evaluate their actions and recognise if, and when they have made a mistake. They will not respond defensively to constructive criticism. They are aware of their own weaknesses. As well

as being able to demonstrate self-awareness, he/she will hold themselves to account and take responsibility for any 'under par' performance or mistakes made. They will adopt an open and honest approach to reporting any incidents to their manager. They would not consider trying to hide or blame others for their own mistakes.

Develops and maintains positive interpersonal relationships based on trust and respect.

The outstanding driver shows respect towards their colleagues, managers and customers, behaving in a positive, consistent manner at all times. They naturally maintain productive relationships with a manager in the same way that they maintain positive relationships with colleagues and customers alike. They are patient and care for others and this comes across in the way that they are willing to help and offer advice to anyone who requires it; conveying an approachable demeanour at all times.

The very best drivers possess strong moral values which guide them in all areas of their work and personal life. They are seen as an honest and trustworthy individual who is respectful. They can often be found just having a 'chat over a cuppa' to maintain open rapport. Wanting

to do a good job they will strive to maintain constructive relationships with others that are based on mutual respect.

They also take great pride in how they interact with customers. They genuinely care about their customers' experiences and take delight in assisting them when necessary.

Logical thinkers able to make safe, sound decisions and judgements in all areas of their driving role.

The very best drivers are able to make effective decisions in all areas of their work and understand the wider importance of solving any problems encountered. They have an ability to make sound and safe decisions. In their decision deliberations, they will adopt an objective and rational approach, evaluating all the information available to them in a logical, sound manner and ensuring that safety has always been accounted for.

Safety is a priority for these drivers and they will not compromise it under any circumstances. If available information is limited or they are under pressure, they will use their initiative. They are able to think on their feet demonstrating an awareness of risk and how to minimise it. They will take ownership for a problem and offer up solutions to resolve it if they are able, rather than 'pass the buck!'

A star quality that an outstanding driver also has is the very valuable ability of seeing problems in a wider context than just the immediate situation. They will look at the bigger picture and understand the impact of leaving a problem unsolved and how it may impact on the organisation or customer service in general.

Sound decision making is also evident in their personal life, as the exceptional driver understands the impact that his/her social life may have on their driving performance. So, they are more likely to make healthy lifestyle choices and decisions. For example, they will plan their social life (Covid-19 permitting!), including alcohol consumption and sleep in a way that does not impose on their driving abilities and work.

Driver research

'Some drivers always try to pass problems on, whereas I always try to deal with it.'

Motivated to continuously learn, develop and keep up to date.

The outstanding driver is self-motivated to learn and develop, driven to update and extend their existing knowledge. They are inquisitive.... we could say one of life's classic, curious cats! They will seek feedback on their performance, take on board any constructive criticism in a positive manner and analyse their own behaviour to see where they might improve. They enjoy extending their knowledge through further training or by refreshing themselves on procedures or guidelines in the pursuit of becoming a better driver. They will not be complacent and assume they already possess the necessary knowledge and skills.

This thirst for learning also includes keeping up to date with day-to-day changes, new notices/services or driving conditions. They are eager to learn; rather than being disinterested or dismissive of new learning opportunities and training courses.

Driver Instructor research interview extract.

'A driver trainee who hadn't begun his traction and route learning decided to spend a lot of his own time riding around on the route he would be driving. This was so he could familiarise himself with it before his route learning. It really helped him be as prepared and knowledgeable in advance of his course.'

Consistently displays a self-motivated and selfless approach to work.

The outstanding driver is committed to high standards. They are extremely flexible and willing to go the extra mile – even if this means taking on additional responsibility; is outside the confines of their job or means working extra, unpaid hours. This characteristic motivates them to complete any task assigned – regardless of the effort involved or whether or not it is compulsory. The exceptional driver will behave in this pro-active manner at all times choosing the 'best option' and never the 'easy option'. The 'I'll do what I'm paid to do' statement is not in their vocabulary!

In addition to this 'gold standard' approach, they will complete tasks in a selfless manner without complaint, consistently putting the company first. They will be the first to volunteer to drive if the team is under-staffed. Similarly, if they've been unwell, they will return back to driving asap. All to minimise disruption – putting the company first. However, whatever they engage in they will always have safety front of mind.



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Driver Manager research interview extract.

'Following a major incident, a driver was working a train North and then returning to London. Because of the disruption he got stopped midway. Instead of going home at that point, he volunteered to help by going North again, even though he knew this would create huge problems for him getting home later.'

Driver Manager research interview extract.

'X was a hard worker who valued his job. He had a good level of knowledge and always tried to expand on that. He enjoyed the job and was always happy to help out. He had strong morals and was selfless. He appreciated that sometimes people have to invest their own time to see the benefits and he was prepared to do this for the good of others. He also had high personal standards and was organised.'

OPC Assessment tools to help find outstanding drivers in a talent acquisition process.

Having explored and defined the characteristics of what makes an outstanding driver in depth, the OPC developed assessment tools to help identify exceptional drivers in a recruitment process. The Outstanding Train Driver Personality Questionnaire (OTDPQ) assesses each of the six personality characteristics included in this article. It provides scores for a candidate vs a norm group of over a thousand train

driver applicants that helps assess if they are more or less likely to behave in the outstanding manner identified. It is suitable for use recruiting train or light rail drivers; it is available online and it has been used extensively by rail companies for many years.

The OTDPQ can also take each applicant's personality profile and generate bespoke interview questions that can be used to explore and probe a candidate's behaviour and motivations further at interview.

Additionally, the Magnificent Seven Situational Judgement Test (M7SJT) is a situational judgement test that explores a candidate's behavioural decision-making and thought processes for realistic hypothetical work-related scenarios. The M7SJT covers situations that are linked to all the outstanding driver personality characteristics. The OTDPQ and M7SJT can be used alongside each other to help recruit the very best drivers.

In summary Dr Stephen Fletcher said: 'The very best train drivers are quietly confident, and not arrogant or overly authoritative in any way. They are often very humble and self-sacrificing people, but not at the expense of safety. They are indeed special people and are a rare find. We support many train operators to first find them, and then select them from a large applicant pool. However, understanding and using these outstanding driver qualities doesn't just end at selection. We also share them through training or development workshops for existing drivers as part of an operator's continuous improvement process – helping drivers to pursue excellence, and be the very best they can be.'

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