

The Effects Of An Incentive Program Intervention On Driver Performance In A Private Nonprofit Agency

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of an incentive program on driver performance. Archival absenteeism, complaint, and at-fault accident data were collected around an incentive program. Results of the study showed partial support of the hypothesis that the incentive program would result in increased driver performance. Limitations of the study and organizational recommendations are presented.

INTRODUCTION

At the same time insurance rates are rising for the transportation industry, the contractors for People For People have imposed a higher level of performance standards. In response to the contractors' requests, People For People implemented a driver incentive program as a form of positive reinforcement for desired behavior. This study will evaluate the effects of this incentive program on van/bus driver performance in three specific areas. It is hypothesized that the implementation of a driver incentive program will decrease driver absences, customer complaints deemed valid by the People For People supervisors, and at-fault driver accidents.

B.F. Skinner initially explored the effects of Operant Conditioning by using laboratory rats as subjects. He found that rats could be conditioned, or trained, to act in a manner dependant on the consequence. For example, Skinner found that rats could be conditioned to understand that when a tone was present, if they pressed a lever food would be released. This study was also an example of the three-term contingency summarized by the A-B-C Model: A- Antecedent stimulus; B-Operant Behavior; C- Consequence (Skinner, 1953). In the above example the tone would represent the (A) or antecedent; the lever would represent the (B) or operant behavior; and the food would represent the (C) or consequence. An antecedent may prompt, cue, or signal a distinctive relationship between environment and behavior (Daniels, 1989). The desirability of the consequence determines the likelihood of the behavior reoccurring. For the rats in the example above, the food released when the lever is pushed was a sufficient reward to result in similar future behavior.

Consequences can also be defined as a form of positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is an operant conditioning process in which consequences strengthen the behavior, or increase the number of occurrences of the behavior (Johnson & Redmon, 2001). In a general sense, positive reinforcement involves adding something to the environment (Daniels, 1989). Evidence of the success of positive reinforcement in the workplace is strong (Komaki, Coombs, Redding, Jr, and Schepman, 2000). According to Daniels (1989), there are three main classes of positive reinforcers that are typically used in performance management: social, work-related, and tangibles. A social reinforcement may be an article of recognition in a newsletter. Work-related reinforcements may include a promotion or being elected to lead a departmental project. Some examples of tangible reinforcements include trophies, fixed incentives, and gift certificates. Importantly, effective reinforcers may also serve as antecedents for future

performance. A study conducted in 2002 by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce revealed that over 80% of organizations they surveyed offered some type of incentive program as a form of positive reinforcement (Anonymous, 2003).

Derived from a Latin word, “incentive” means “to stimulate” (Neil, 1990). In order for an incentive program to be effective, it is important to determine what “stimulates” or motivates the individual. The most effective rewards to use in an effort to motivate individuals towards desired performance depends in part on individual needs, as delineated in some basic human motivation theories. The following will summarize some of the need-based human motivation theories as well as some techniques for surveying a group to determine their preferred motivator. Also included in this review is a discussion of whether a monetary reward, the motivator used in this study, can motivate a group towards desired results. This review will conclude with a summary of frequently used incentive programs that use a monetary reward as the primary motivator.

Many organizations have used these theories as a foundation for determining the source of motivation or rewards within their incentive program by making an effort to understand what is truly important to the employee. There might be a wide-range of motivators for one particular group. Determining the needs, wants, and desires of a select group can be done in a number of ways. For example, organizations may conduct interviews, administer surveys, or simply observe behavior (Daniels, 1989). Cardrain (2003) stresses that it is also important to examine demographic and psychological factors when determining an appropriate reward. For example, there is likely a difference in preference of rewards between an entry-level clerk versus a high-ranking sales representative. A monetary reward might be more important to the entry-level clerk to satisfy basic needs whereas the sales representative might be happier with a trophy or a plaque to enhance their self esteem. Regardless of the method used to uncover the source of motivation, it is important the organization has honest intentions and the ability to deliver the promised rewards (Grant, 1990). Daniels (1989) advises that the type of reinforcement selected must be what you have in your possession. For example, if you are going to offer a monetary type of reinforcement under your incentive plan, it is essential the funding is available.

This study used a monetary reward as a motivator within an incentive program. There is much debate about the use of monetary rewards. Several studies have indicated that employees generally rank pay as a fifth or sixth concern within their job (Kohn, 1998). Herzberg stated that decreasing one’s pay most likely will be enough to demotivate an employee and decrease their performance, but an increase in one’s pay certainly will not guarantee an increase in performance (Herzberg et al., 1959). One potential drawback to using money as a motivator is that the employee must pay taxes on the reward they receive, which diminishes the overall value. Some organizations increase the amount of the award to compensate for the taxes that will be taken out but this only leads to an increase in cost for the organization, possibly without additional improvement in performance (Cardrain, 2003). One of the biggest drawbacks in using a monetary award is that generally employees tend to expect the additional income to continue; thus creating a sense of entitlement without relating it to improved performance. Abbott and Kleiner (1992), quote a study conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation that showed 45 percent of 845 blue and white-collar workers surveyed did not believe there is a link between traditional pay (wages) and performance.

Markowich (1994) proposed that due to many drastic changes with regard to the makeup of an American household and income, sources of motivation have changed since the 1960’s, when the early need-based motivation theories were developed. Markowich presents the following statistics:

- The US Census Bureau reported that 75% of women with children are now working to maintain their household obligations.
- The US Department of Labor reported that 65% of families in 1991 had two or more people at work to meet routine expenses or to pay off debt.
- The New York Times reported that family income from 1970 to 1990 has not kept pace with inflation.

Markowich concluded that current studies reveal that monetary compensation will be ranked higher with regard to human motivation. Abernathy and Williams published a study in 1998 that concurs with Marowich. Abernathy and Williams’ study supported the argument that money does motivate individuals to improve performance, but performance improvements are contingent on the amount of the monetary reward. They found that

reward with incentive pay only improves performance if the amount of the reward exceeds 20% of base pay. They believed that if the amount paid were significant enough, performance would improve. This study is consistent with a study conducted by the American Productivity & Quality Center in which it was reported that over 75 percent of organizations now have moved to a non-traditional monetary reward system in addition to regular wages to achieve desired performance (Abbot and Kleiner, 1992).

There are some standard forms of incentive programs that are widely used among organizations. According to an article published in Pensions and Benefits Magazine (Anonymous, 2003), the 2002 participation rate in company incentive programs and retirement programs is on the rise. Below are some of the 2002 statistics on participation rates among American organizations that were extracted from a study conducted by the US Chamber of Commerce (anonymous, 2003) in reference to incentive programs:

- 82% of the participating organizations offered a 401 (k) plan;
- 39% of the participating organizations offered a profit sharing plan;
- 27% of the participating organizations offered Employee Stock Ownership Plans;

According to the US Chamber of Commerce study, the employer contributions for the 401(k) programs averaged around 4.2% of payroll while profit sharing programs averaged around 5.4% of payroll, and defined bonus plans averaged around 1% of payroll.

The organization in the present study elected to use a monetary reward as an incentive in an effort to decrease at-fault accidents, employee absenteeism, and valid customer complaints, the areas specified by their contractors. The organization elected to pay employees an additional 25 cents per driving hour should they meet the quarterly eligibility criteria. The incentive payments ranged from 2 – 3% of the drivers quarterly income. The eligibility criteria for a reward under this incentive program was to not have any written disciplinary documentation in their personnel file during the pertaining quarter. If a driver has a disciplinary action in their file, they are ineligible under the incentive plan for that quarter.

AGENCY HISTORY

The agency was originally created to assist in fighting the war on poverty in the Yakima Valley through developing a skilled workforce by providing employment and training resources. For fifteen years, PFP survived wide variability in both funding and staffing. The agency's budget fluctuated from six million dollars to under one million dollars, then back up to four-and-a-half million dollars in the 1980's. The agency's budget rebounded in the early 1980's due to a diversification in services when the Transportation Division was created in Yakima County. The Transportation Division worked hand-in-hand with the Employment in Training Division by assisting clients in getting back and forth to work and training. In addition, the transportation division provided services for "special needs" clients. Some examples of "special needs transportation" are trips to doctor's appointments, senior transportation, and transportation for disabled persons. The Transportation Division began under one small contract, but over time has expanded and now makes up over 50% of the agency's overall budget.

At the agency's fiscal-year end (June 30, 2003), the agency's budget was just over 16 million dollars. Over 9 million dollars of the agency's budget is contributed to transportation contracts that serve five different counties in Washington State. In addition, the Transportation Division also claims 134 of the agency's 212 employees.

The at-fault driver accident rate and employee absences began to rise as the employee's sense of accountability began to deteriorate. One of the most notable changes that occurred during Chris's transition was when the newest transportation contract (Mason County Transportation) recently voted in union representation. In order to measure and reward performance at the level required by the agency's transportation contractors, PFP developed a driver incentive program that focused primarily on driver attendance, at-fault accidents, and client satisfaction. This program is the focus of this study.

After a thorough review of the history of the agency's compensation program, it was discovered that the drivers had never been compensated based on their performance. Since the adoption of the Transportation Division, the drivers were on a tiered salary chart based solely on longevity. Rather than disrupting the compensation program for the drivers, the agency opted to positively reinforce preferred behavior through a driver incentive program. The incentive program stated specific eligibility criteria that would result in a quarterly incentive payout for drivers based on their individual service hours.

In summary, there are many methods organizations use to create and sustain success. Incentive programs are a method used to guide employees towards organizational goals by reinforcing desired performance. It is important to consider what really stimulates or motivates an individual. Results of studies might lead one to believe that pay is a satisfier rather than a motivator. Earlier theories suggested that a sense of achievement or increased responsibility may motivate humans more than monetary rewards. More recent statistics show a dramatic increase in American organization's participation in incentive programs with monetary rewards. Could the bottom line dollar mean more to Americans today than it did decades ago? People For People designed an incentive program that includes a monetary reward with the belief that it would motivate their drivers to achieve desired performance criteria. It was hypothesized that the implementation of a driver incentive program would decrease driver absences, customer complaints deemed valid by the People For People supervisors, and at-fault driver accidents.

METHOD

This study used a pre and post comparison design to assess the effects of a financial incentive program for the van/bus drivers. The incentive program was designed to improve driver performance in three specific areas: attendance, at-fault accident rate, and valid customer complaints. Drivers were awarded an additional twenty-five cents per hour worked if they met the eligibility requirement of the incentive program by not incurring any written discipline in their employee file during the pertaining quarter. Written discipline occurs when a driver violates any of the policies within the People For People Employee Handbook. This study primarily focused on the Transportation Division with worksites located in Yakima, Moses Lake, and Shelton, Washington. The Moses Lake location was the participating site in this study. The primary contacts for this study were the Director of Transportation and the Moses Lake Operations Manager. All employee information was provided by the Director of Transportation and his direct reports.

The drivers in this study work under two different contracts at the Moses Lake site. The first contract requires a driver to drive a fixed-route schedule that is dictated through Grant Transit Authority (People For People Contractor/funding source). In 2003, the number of miles driven under the fixed-route Grant Transit Authority Contract were 561,506. The other contract that a Moses Lake Driver might operate under provides special needs transportation defined earlier. In 2003, the number of miles driven under the special needs transportation contract were 872,757. All of the drivers may be asked to work under both contracts. There were a total of 47 part time and fulltime drivers that participated in this study. The 2003 range of miles driven by the participants in this study is 1937- 48. Of the drivers participating in the study, 19 were female and 28 were male.

For the purpose of this study, archival data detailing absences, valid customer complaints, and at-fault accident rates were provided for the first two quarters of 2003 (January 1, 2003 to June 30, 2003) by the Operations Manager at the Moses Lake location. For the purpose of this study, absences, valid customer complaints, and at-fault accidents are presented in Table 1 below.

The incentive program was designed by the Transportation Director and his direct reports. The goal of the program was to decrease driver accidents, valid customer complaints, and at-fault accidents. Although the three specific focus areas were unique to People For People and People For People's contractor's needs, the design of an incentive program was almost completely based on a design of a program developed by another transit agency, which used similar eligibility criteria. Agency drivers were not asked to participate in the development of the process and were neither asked nor surveyed for their input in the program. With the three focus areas in mind, and after small modifications, the director and his group decided on a final version of the incentive program. The original version of the incentive program stated that any at-fault accidents, valid customer complaints, or unexcused absences during the

applicable quarter would result in disqualification under the incentive program for that quarter. The modification on the final draft of the incentive program stated that any written discipline in a driver’s personnel file for the applicable quarter would make that driver ineligible for the program for that quarter. It is important to note that the objective criteria were changed to subjective criteria in the final draft.

Table 1
Criteria Definition

Absences:	An attendance violation occurs when a driver is scheduled and fails to report to work or notify the on-call dispatcher at least 3 hours prior to the commencement of their scheduled shift.
Valid Customer Complaints:	A valid customer complaint occurs when the results of an investigation, conducted by the Operations Manager, of a customer complaint results in verification that the employee has violated any standards set forth in the Moses Lake Driver Handbook.
At Fault Accident:	An at fault accident occurs when the results of an accident involving a People For People Driver is confirmed by a supervisor and a member of the safety committee team that the situation could have been preventable according to Washington State Transportation Insurance Pool standards.

Timeline: Pre-intervention

- The incentive program was developed by the Transportation Director and his direct reports, and then presented it to the Chief Executive Officer and the agency’s Board of Directors for approval.
- Two weeks prior to implementing the incentive plan, a copy was given to each driver at one of their quarterly driver meetings. A detailed explanation of the components of the incentive plan was presented by the Director of Transportation along with the Moses Lake Operations Manager in a mandatory drivers meeting. The Transportation Director placed an emphasis on reducing at-fault accidents, absences, and valid customer complaints. At this time, drivers were encouraged to ask questions to ensure their understanding of the new driver incentive program.
- Data regarding at-fault driving accidents, driver attendance, and valid customer complaints from the first two quarters of 2003 were collected from the Moses Lake Operations Manager and charted by the researcher.

Intervention

- At the beginning of the 3rd quarter of 2003 (July 1, 2003), the driver incentive program was implemented.
- The Transportation Program Managers were responsible for reporting the drivers who were eligible for payment under the driver incentive program each quarter to the payroll department at the end of each quarter. In addition, they were also responsible for supplying the proper written documentation for the drivers who were deemed ineligible for the driver incentive payout for each quarter.
- The payroll department was responsible for issuing a check separate from the drivers’ regular payroll check in the amount of their calculated incentive payment. The stub attached to the check congratulated the driver and detailed the number of hours worked that quarter which the incentive payment was calculated from.

Post-intervention

- Data regarding at-fault driving accidents, driver attendance, and valid customer complaints from the last two quarters of 2003, were collected from the Moses Lake Operations Manager and charted by the researcher. The driver incentive results were shared with the Transportation Director, his direct reports, and the CEO.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a financial incentive program on van/bus driver performance in three specific areas. It was hypothesized that the implementation of a driver incentive program would decrease customer complaints deemed valid by the People For People supervisors, at-fault driver accidents, and driver absences.

The results of the study do not support the hypotheses. This section of the paper will consist of the presentation of the raw data collected in the study and the results of the statistical analysis performed to test the absenteeism hypothesis.

Table 2 presents the raw data for customer complaints for the pre and post intervention periods. Due to the low number of occurrences, no statistical test was performed. While the number of complaints decreased in the post-intervention period, it was not possible to test for a statistically significant difference.

Table 2
Customer Complaints Deemed Valid By The People
For People Supervisors

Pre Intervention	Post Intervention
2	0

Table 3 presents the raw data for at-faults accidents for the pre and post intervention periods. At-fault accidents were one for both periods. No statistical test was performed.

Table 3
At-fault Accidents Deemed Valid By The People
For People Supervisors In Accordance To WSTIP Guidelines

Pre Intervention	Post Intervention
1	1

For the purposes of the study, absences were only considered relevant only if the driver failed to report for a scheduled shift, which resulted in the need for a replacement driver. People For People's policy regarding replacement drivers is to use part-time drivers first, if available, then full-time drivers. Replacement costs per hour range from \$8.70 to \$14.30 per hour. In some instances, the replacement costs are greater if the driver scheduled has already driven 40 hours that workweek, thus resulting in an overtime premium.

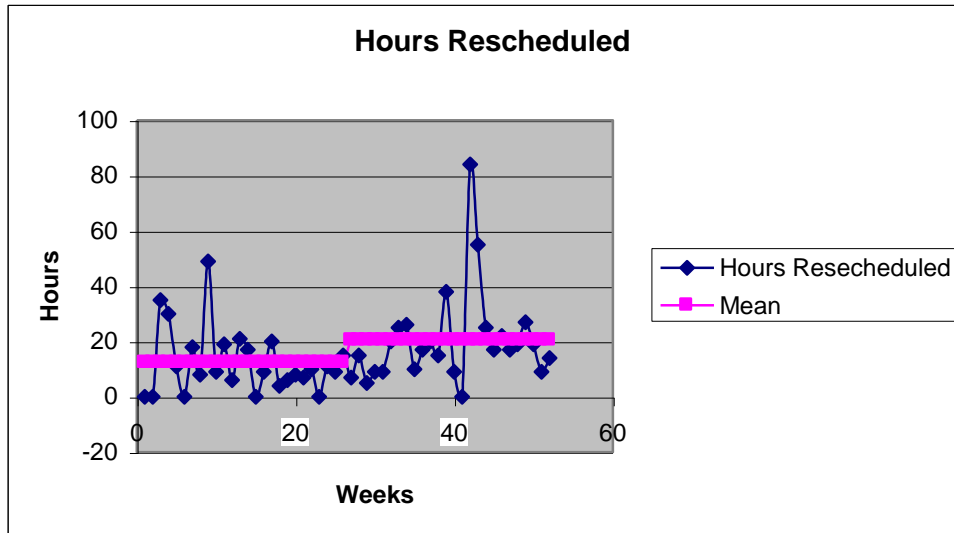
Figure 1 presents a graphical depiction of the absence data, including the means for the pre and post intervention time periods during the study. The mean for the pre-intervention period was 12.4 hours per week and the mean for the post-intervention time period was 20.5 hours per week.

It was hypothesized that the financial incentive program would result in lower absenteeism for the drivers to test this hypothesis, a one-tailed t-test was performed. The results of the analysis indicated that absenteeism during the post-intervention period was statistically significantly higher than during the pre-intervention period ($t=1.95$, $p<.05$). This result was opposite of the hypothesized outcome.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a financial incentive program on van/bus driver performance in three specific areas. It was hypothesized that the implementation of a driver incentive program would decrease customer complaints deemed valid by the People For People supervisors, at-fault driver accidents, and driver absences. The results of the study do not support the hypotheses. This section of the paper will consist of a discussion of the results of this study, client recommendations, limitations of the study, and future research recommendations.

**Figure 1
Absenteeism Data**



The customer complaints as deemed valid by the People For People supervisors, in the pre and post-intervention periods went from two to zero. While these results support the hypothesis, no statistical analysis was performed due to the low number of occurrences. Three customer complaints were reported in the pre-intervention period with two of the three deemed valid. Two customer complaints were reported in the post-intervention period and both were deemed invalid by the supervisor. It is important to note that in May of 2003 there was change in the leadership at the Moses Lake location when one of the direct supervisors of the drivers was replaced. This change in leadership may have resulted in the low number of customer complaint occurrences due to lack of training or enforcement of the supervisor. After further review, it appears that the agency has historically had low levels of customer complaint occurrences. This might suggest that this measure, that was based on another agency’s driver incentive plan design, may have been inappropriate for People For People to target.

The number of at-fault accidents in the pre and post-intervention periods was one per period. As with the customer complaint variable, no statistical analysis was performed due to the low number of occurrences. It should be noted that there were actually three at-fault accidents reported during the post-intervention period. However, two of the three accidents were not reported in this study. The first unreported accident was caused by a driver who was not eligible for the driver incentive program due to his hire date. The second unreported accident was caused by a maintenance employee who did not qualify for the driver incentive program. As with the customer complaint variable, the agency had historically low levels of at-fault accident occurrences. Again, this might suggest that this measure, that was based on another agency’s driver incentive plan design, may have been inappropriate for People For People to target.

The mean of the absences in the pre and post intervention periods were 12.4 and 20.5; this is opposite from the hypothesized result. While this result appears to be strongly affected by an outlier in week 42 with 84 hours needing to be rescheduled, this is not the case. A post-hoc t-test was performed after replacing the 84 with the mean of the period (20.5). The result was again statistically significant ($t=1.77, p<.05$).

It is critical to note that the absenteeism data as reported in the study did not necessarily result in the exclusion of the drivers in the incentive program. As was noted earlier, the objective absenteeism criterion was removed from the original draft of the driver incentive plan. In the final draft, drivers would only be deemed ineligible from the driver incentive plan with regard to excess absenteeism when they received a form of written discipline from their supervisor. During the post intervention period, no drivers were formally disciplined for

absenteeism. It is likely that the motivating potential of the intervention was negated due to the change in the incentive plan.

It is possible that the increase in absenteeism may have been due to seasonal issues. The absenteeism rate was high during the post-intervention period (July 1, 2003 – December 31, 2003), which may have been due to illness during the flu season, hunting season, or late summer vacations.

CLIENT RECOMMENDATIONS

In reviewing the number customer complaints, at-fault accidents, and absenteeism data for the last two quarters in 2003, the number of occurrences in two of the three areas (customer complaints and at-fault accidents) were limited which prevented any reported change to be significant. The agency should determine if the three areas originally selected for improvement are truly the areas they should be targeting. The agency should then investigate if there are other or additional problematic areas that should be targeted with regard to driver performance and select a proper method of measurement for each area.

As noted earlier in this study, the original version of the driver incentive program contained an objective measurement with regard to driver absences. In the final version of the driver incentive program the objective measurement was removed and replaced with subjective criteria that were completely dependent on supervisory discretion. A post-hoc analysis was conducted to explore other reward options in utilizing the original draft of the driver incentive program. The actual amount of bonus dollars paid to the drivers for the third quarter was \$3,505.12. The amount of money that the agency could have saved by utilizing the criteria in the original draft of the driver incentive plan was \$1,007.78. The agency could have saved this money to offset the expenses paid to the other drivers who actually did meet the eligibility criteria. Another option would have been to divide the savings among the eligible drivers to increase their reward from an additional 25 cents per hour to an additional 35 cents per hour.

The actual amount of bonus dollars paid to the drivers for the fourth quarter was \$3,784.53. The amount of money that the agency could have saved by utilizing the criteria in the original draft of the driver incentive plan was \$1,486.91. The potential savings would have equated to an additional 41 cents per hour for eligible drivers rather than the traditional base of 25 cents per hour.

As mentioned earlier, the agency should evaluate the current eligibility criterion for the driver incentive plan to determine if the focus areas are correctly identified to measure good driver performance. One method of evaluating the current criterion and identifying future focus areas or performance criterion for the driver incentive plan might be to simply ask the drivers. The agency might consider forming a self-directed team among the drivers to examine the performance requirements of their positions. The agency should empower the team to develop a proposal of the eligibility criteria and method of distribution of the rewards under the program including the possibility of team-based reward system. Utilizing this method would reverse the initial top down approach in designing the driver incentive program and empower those closest to the process to determine their own performance criterion: Thus creating a sense of buy in from the drivers in addition to a sense of accountability enforced from driver-to-driver.

LIMITATIONS

There are a few notable limitations from this study. The first limitation to the study occurred when the agency made the decision to remove the objective criteria from the original draft of the driver incentive plan. The agency's decision to remove the objective criteria left the driver eligibility at the discretion of the supervisors. It is also important to note that one of the supervisors was replaced in May of 2003.

Another major limitation to this study is that the design of the driver incentive plan was based on a plan developed by another transit operation. As mentioned above, two of the three focus areas (complaints, accidents) in the driver incentive did not have enough occurrences to be statistically significant. It could be possible that using an incentive plan designed by another agency may not have identified criteria relevant to People For People's performance.

Another major limitation was during the design phase of the incentive program. As mentioned earlier, the Director of Transportation and his direct reports approved a plan design based off of an incentive plan that was used in another transit operation. At no time were the drivers that would have been impacted by the plan asked to contribute to the plan design. Failing to actively involve the drivers in the development of the incentive plan, may have created a sense of disconnect between the drivers and the performance criteria or created possible lack of buy in. Furthermore, the process utilized by the agency to develop the plan may have completely missed the mark in determining the true areas that should have been measured. In an agency employee satisfaction survey, the drivers from the Moses Lake location were asked to rate the driver incentive plan. One driver's response was, "The driver incentive plan, what a joke. Try to come up with something more challenging". Other drivers rated the driver incentive plan as being fair.

Other limitations of the study include the amount and distribution of the rewards. As mentioned in the study, the amount of the reward was 25 cents per hour. The range of the reward for the drivers was 2-3 percent of their quarterly earnings. Studies noted earlier suggest that a reward is only meaningful if the monetary amount equates to at least 20 percent of their earnings for the particular period (Abbot and Kleiner, 1992).

Recommendations for future research include an evaluation of the effectiveness of the current plan design. The Agency might consider reinstating the original objective criteria for determining eligibility for the plan and allowing the drivers to determine the process for the distribution of rewards. Alternatively, the agency may choose to start over with the plan design. At the onset of this process, it might be beneficial for the agency to include drivers in the process. The agency may even choose to turnover the responsibility completely to the drivers to develop objective criterion for the plan and determine a fair method of distribution for the reward. Whichever option the agency chooses to utilize, it might be beneficial to pilot the program to measure the effectiveness prior to implementing the plan agency wide.

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NOTES