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# **BUS DRIVING – CAN IT BE A GOOD JOB?**

**Wendy Jones<sup>1</sup>; Roger Haslam<sup>1</sup>; Cheryl Haslam<sup>2</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Loughborough Design School, Loughborough University, UK*

*<sup>2</sup>School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, UK*

Bus driving is recognised as an occupation where jobs are typically of poor quality and can have adverse effects on health. The current study explored how job quality differed for bus and coach drivers from three companies, identifying the most realistic areas for improvement, based on the similarities and differences between the companies. It also confirmed the usefulness of this approach for ergonomics in general. In areas of stress management and low control there was found to be limited potential for change. Scope for improvement was found in planning of working hours, health and safety, and vehicle/maintenance quality in some companies. However, it was acknowledged that change was unlikely to occur unless employers could be persuaded that it would be beneficial to their organisation.

## **Introduction**

Assessing and improving job design and job quality have long been of interest to ergonomists, with the aim of reducing the adverse effects of work on health. More recently, consideration has been given to how work can be positively beneficial for health (Smith et al., 2011). There is much discussion about which features are most important in making a job ‘good’: Rose (2003) identifies pay and security as key, Lowe (2001) finds relationships to be a critical factor, and Clark (2005) highlights the importance of the actual work done. There are also concerns about the impact of sedentary work, and the need for ergonomics to move away from its ‘less is better’ paradigm (Straker & Mathiassen, 2009).

Bus drivers are an interesting group to study in this respect, given the inactive nature of the role and the long association with poor health. Morris et al. (1953) found the risk of heart disease for bus drivers to be twice that of their conductor

colleagues. They also suffer from gastrointestinal disorders, musculoskeletal problems and poor mental health (Tse et al, 2006). Bus drivers have low job satisfaction (Rose, 2003); report stress and fatigue which they associate with passengers, traffic, and timetables (Biggs et al., 2009; Tse et al., 2007); and suffer from obesity which persists despite provision of exercise facilities, healthy food and education (French et al., 2010). The European Working Conditions Survey, considering employment sectors in Europe, identifies Land Transport (which includes bus driving) as one of the worst. Working conditions are poor, including long and non-standard working hours, low levels of job control, and risks of physical violence. Poor health outcomes include work related stress and musculoskeletal problems (Jettinghoff & Houtman, 2009).

This study aimed to assess the potential for improving job quality in bus driving. The study design compared different companies and the experiences of their drivers to identify instances of good working practices which may serve as examples for others in the industry. Sharing best practice is an approach widely taken by organisations such as the Health and Safety Executive, Business in the Community, and Eurofound as a means of improving job quality.

## **Method**

### *Organisations*

Three UK bus companies were recruited for this study. The companies are identified in this paper by pseudonyms as some of the data presented is commercially sensitive.

- BigBus is a large independent company which employs around 800 drivers across three depots and provides timetabled bus services.
- LittleBus is a small, family run company which employs around 100 drivers, and provides timetabled bus services as well as private hire coaches.
- LittleCoach is a small family run company which employs around 60 drivers and runs private hire and holiday excursions in the UK and overseas.

### *Formal interviews*

Semi structured interviews lasting around 25 minutes each were carried out with 50 drivers (9-11 from each of the smaller companies, and from each depot of the larger company) to explore their experiences of working in their current and previous jobs. 43 of the interviewees were male, and 7 female. The average age was 45 years, (range 23 to 64), with a similar age profile across each company. Maximum length of service for interviewees was 22 years, although the average varied from 8 years in BigBus to less than 2 years in LittleBus.

At LittleBus and LittleCoach, interviewees were recruited by the researcher based on availability. At BigBus, interviews were scheduled by depot managers, based on availability. Male, female, recently recruited and long serving drivers were represented in the sample at each company/depot.

Interviews were also carried out with ten managers (3 at LittleBus, 2 at LittleCoach, 5 at BigBus), about their particular roles within the organisation. Copies of company policies and procedures were obtained where possible.

#### *Observation, informal interviews and other data*

Visits to each depot were used as opportunities for unstructured observation and informal discussion with drivers, and to view artifacts such as rotas. A total of 33 visits were carried out, facilitating conversations with 62 drivers and supervisors in addition to those formally interviewed. Observation was also undertaken on 12 bus journeys with BigBus and LittleBus during the period of study. It had been intended to gather and compare outcome data such as sickness absence, staff turnover and accident rates, but the two smaller companies did not keep records which would permit this.

#### *Analysis*

Recorded interviews were transcribed. For informal discussions and observations, brief notes were made as soon as possible, and more complete notes written up within 24 hours. Observation notes and interview transcripts were imported into NVivo and coded. Initial coding was done against a framework of key work aspects identified from the literature, the template was revised as additional themes were identified (King, 2004) and the coding was reviewed by a second researcher. Other measures taken to improve the trustworthiness of the findings include the large sample size of interviewees (formal and informal), the inclusion of observational data as well as interviews, and reporting the key findings back to the organisations to invite comments.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Hours*

Working patterns varied widely. At BigBus, most drivers worked a 3 shift pattern with full weeks on earlies, lates or 'middles'. Within this structure, there could be wide variation in start times such as 6am one day followed by 11am and 7am on the second and third days respectively. At LittleBus there were more fixed shifts and slow rotation, e.g. starting each week slightly later than the previous week. At LittleCoach there was less variation in the working days, most shifts started between 6.30am and 9am. Drivers at all three companies were unhappy about quick changes, e.g. nine hours or less overnight between shifts.

Typical working days varied in length from approximately 8 hours at BigBus to 10 -12 hours at LittleCoach and LittleBus. Drivers at BigBus also benefitted from knowing their working patterns at least 3 months in advance. At the other extreme, work at LittleCoach was rarely scheduled more than 2 days ahead, and working hours could change at less than 24 hours' notice.

Some drivers at BigBus, found positive value in their work patterns, e.g. having early shifts that finished by lunchtime, so they could spend time with their

families. Other drivers were indifferent to the working hours, accepting them as an inevitable feature of the job they had chosen. However, irregular working patterns and last minute shift changes gave many drivers cause for concern about the impact on their health, their safety and their personal life.

### *Inactivity*

The sedentary nature of the job and its impact on health was an issue in all three organisations. Many drivers talked about having gained weight since starting the job. BigBus provided an on-site gym and arguably, their employees had fewer barriers to undertaking exercise as their shifts were shorter: but there was no clear evidence that they were actually more active as a result.

The sedentary nature of many jobs is a major public health issue, with evidence suggesting that prolonged sitting increases mortality (Patel et al., 2010). This is likely to remain a significant factor affecting good job quality for bus drivers.

### *Stress*

Timetabling caused stress for drivers in all companies on occasion, they disliked running late because it made passengers unhappy and angry. Drivers at LittleBus and BigBus complained that some routes did not allow sufficient time to get to destinations. However, both companies claimed to plan schedules with great care, and had recently installed bus tracking equipment so they could monitor late running and revise timetables if necessary.

Passengers were identified as a source of stress. They were perceived as being more challenging in urban areas than rural ones and on timetabled services in comparison with private hires or scheduled coaches. BigBus was seen by some of its drivers as judging its employees unduly harshly if, for example, they reacted to bad passenger behaviour.

There were clear individual differences in the way drivers handled these issues in their work. Over half saw passengers as being the aspect of their job that made it good, and made little or no comment about the potential challenges. They talked about how they built relationships with regular customers. Others saw passengers as the biggest difficulty they faced, emphasising the fact that they could be rude, aggressive or elderly and slow, which made it difficult to keep to the timetable. There were differences too in the way the stress of running late affected drivers, with some finding it a significant problem and others accepting that it was beyond their control.

The key causes of stress in bus driving seem unlikely to change but there is scope to minimise their impact on drivers through well planned and regularly reviewed timetables and good support for staff when difficulties arise. The findings in this study regarding the differences between individuals echo those in the literature about the impact of different coping styles (Machin & Hoare, 2008). This suggests there are benefits to be achieved from training staff to deal

constructively with such challenges, and also to consider the ideal personality characteristics for successful drivers when recruiting.

#### *Physical ergonomics and comfort*

Bus quality and maintenance were generally good at BigBus and LittleCoach, but appeared less satisfactory at LittleBus, where drivers complained about old buses, cold buses and poor maintenance. This was confirmed by observation. There was a wide range of vehicle models and drivers reported that some were particularly uncomfortable or difficult to drive. At BigBus there were standard bus models and driver representatives had been involved in their selection in the past, although some believed that bus quality was deteriorating. Prolonged sitting aggravated the discomfort, for example some shifts at LittleBus and BigBus involved unbroken periods of driving in excess of 5 hours.

Although the job will always involve prolonged sitting and whole body vibration, this study suggests that some companies could do more to improve physical comfort. Careful selection of new vehicles, with driver involvement, and account taken of ergonomics factors in the cab could reduce risk. High standards of maintenance, including to the driver's seat, are also critical.

#### *Pay*

The hourly rate at BigBus was 20-40% higher than at the two smaller companies, although there was some potential for tips at LittleCoach and bonus payments at LittleBus. There was evidence that drivers at the smaller companies worked longer hours, which compensated for their lower hourly wage.

Many drivers at BigBus considered themselves to be well paid (particularly in relation to their level of education) and considered their pay to be a feature which made their job good. The drivers at LittleBus and LittleCoach raised concerns about the job being poorly paid, particularly because of the responsibility they had for other people's lives and the consequences of making a mistake.

Pay level is an important feature in determining job quality (Rose, 2003) and in this study there is a clear difference between the large and small organisations. At the smaller companies pay rates are below those which may be considered adequate to support an acceptable lifestyle (Davis et al., 2012).

#### *Job Security*

Job security was not raised as an issue of concern at LittleBus; drivers were generally quite itinerant and were confident of getting employment elsewhere if necessary. At LittleCoach, there were some concerns about the reliability of working hours as much of the work was seasonal and there would be occasions when less work was available (and therefore pay would be lower). Drivers at BigBus had some anxieties about job security given the company's relatively low threshold for taking disciplinary action including dismissal.

### *Health and safety*

General health and safety seemed to be taken very seriously at BigBus, with provision of formal safety training, operation of safety committees, and enforcement of rules e.g. wearing high visibility jackets, keeping to marked walkways. Driver training, provided in-house, included dealing with customers, driving skills, and periodic on-bus observations. At LittleBus and LittleCoach there appeared to be a lower emphasis on health and safety. Problems included uneven or diesel coated road surfaces in the depot, a lack of safe walking routes, and poor compliance with welfare legislation.

Fixed safety screens were built into all buses at BigBus to protect against the risk of passenger violence. Although some drivers had concerns about risk from passengers, there were also many who disliked the screens, feeling they interfered with communication with their passengers. Observation confirmed that passengers on such buses were less likely to interact with the driver than those on LittleBus, although the differing use of automatic cards and cash could also have contributed to this. At LittleBus there were no protective screens, but drivers did not raise concerns about the risk of violence during their interviews. BigBus and LittleBus had closed circuit television installed which drivers generally felt positive about, as it could be used as evidence if claims were made against them (by passengers or other drivers).

The wide variation in management of health and safety in these three companies suggests there is scope for improvement in some. This could include training to cope better with the uncontrollable risks from passengers and other traffic.

### *Control*

In all companies, personal decision making was limited by factors such as fixed timetables, scheduled working patterns and the need to comply with rules and regulations. However drivers in all companies had some opportunities to select or apply for the working patterns and bus routes that best suited them. At LittleCoach and LittleBus there was a greater degree of autonomy whilst driving. Drivers at BigBus had radios, and were expected to contact Radio Control for advice before making any decisions.

The job of a bus driver is unavoidably inflexible, and requires a high degree of compliance from drivers. Yet freedom from close supervision is a specific reason why many chose to go into the job and there are opportunities for driver input into decision making. There is also scope for companies to intentionally recruit drivers who are most comfortable with this low level of autonomy.

### *Likelihood of change*

Drivers at all three companies could benefit from improvements to their working hours. However, commercial pressures make it unlikely that driver working patterns will change substantially unless regulatory change forces them to: the current rules for drivers on local bus services permit 7 ½ hours driving without a formal break (although a maximum of 5 ½ hours is more usually applied), and an

overnight rest period as short as 8 ½ hours (VOSA, 2011). The smaller companies in particular have less flexibility, as they have fewer drivers and routes to work with, and little slack in the system.

At both LittleBus and LittleCoach, other key factors to improve job quality would be improved pay and management of health and safety: also better vehicle quality (at LittleBus) and work planning (at LittleCoach).

Pay rates are unlikely to change given the competitive nature of the industry and the lack of negotiating power which the drivers have. This also makes it unlikely that changes will occur to working time, particularly as the drivers may favour long working hours to compensate for low pay rates.

The biggest barrier to change in the smaller companies is the culture and the personal style of the owner/director in each case. At LittleCoach, a priority of maximising the usage rate of vehicles leads to acceptance of last minute bookings and late changes to drivers' work schedules. At LittleBus there is a focus on running a low cost business. Both companies rely on informal discussion rather than policy to resolve problems or personal difficulties, but with differing approaches amongst managers, the results are unpredictable.

Neither organisation responded to an invitation to meet and discuss the management report provided by the researcher following data gathering. Change is unlikely at either company as long as they are able to recruit staff and to operate successfully.

## **Summary and conclusions**

The most intractable challenges to high job quality for bus drivers are similar to those in many industries: prolonged sedentary work and the potential conflict between the needs of the employee and those of the customer or wider society. In bus driving, this results in unsociable working hours, low levels of autonomy, relatively low pay for some, and a risk of hostility or violence from passengers.

This study has highlighted other areas where there may be scope for change. It has shown that comparison between companies is a good method for exploring this, but that changes to job quality will not occur unless employers can be persuaded that there are benefits in doing this.

It is unlikely that bus driving will ever be a 'good' job, but this study has illustrated that it may be 'good enough' in some organisations. This is particularly the case for workers who are temperamentally suited to it. An ergonomics approach can usefully highlight the most promising areas for improvement.



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