



The Challenge of Employee Absenteeism

What is the connection between employee absenteeism and ‘dropped trips,’ and why is it significant?

The Panel identified dropped trips due to employee absenteeism as a significant problem, which directly affects the T’s ability to live up to its published schedule. While the overall percentage of dropped trips may seem small, the absolute numbers are anything but: in 2014, more than 31,000 trips were dropped, causing thousands of riders to be left on the curb, literally out in the cold.

If the MBTA’s goal is to actually run its schedule as promised – as it should be – then the question to be analyzed is: what are the major preventable reasons for dropped trips? The Panel found that unscheduled employee absenteeism is a major and increasing cause of dropped trips. Between the second quarter of FY2014 and second quarter of FY2015 (October to December 2013 and October to December 2014, respectively), the percentage of trips dropped increased from 1.35% to 1.8%, and the proportion of trips dropped because of the absence of an operator increased from 63% to 70%. Therefore, in order to reach the goal of running the entire MBTA schedule as promised, the MBTA must manage its workforce and operations in order to minimize dropped trips and specifically those due to unscheduled employee absenteeism.

A schedule is a promise: for MBTA passengers, a bus should appear when the schedule says it will. If a rider uses only two buses per day and only on weekdays, they are taking 520 bus trips annually and if 1.5-1.8% of those trips are dropped, then their bus simply does not show up eight times per year. Would anyone find that acceptable?

What is the significance of ‘unscheduled’ absenteeism, and how did the Panel calculate it for the purposes of the report?

The Panel focused on unscheduled absences because, as mentioned above, they cause the greatest disruption to the T’s schedule and have the greatest impact on riders. Scheduled absences can be planned for and accommodated, whereas unscheduled absences cause trips to be dropped.

In order to calculate the 11% absentee rate, the Panel divided the number of unscheduled absences by the number of total days that MBTA employees are expected to be at work in the year. In other words, the Panel excluded vacation, holiday, and training days from BOTH the numerator and the denominator, in order to be consistent.

Some reports have incorrectly suggested that the Panel used the average employee days worked per year as the denominator in the calculation, and have used this to criticize the approach. This is not the case. The Panel took the view that removing holidays and other scheduled days off from the 261 workday total

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to give a total of 230 expected working days was appropriate. The Panel was seeking to understand the number of days missed compared to the number of days employees were expected to work.

To reiterate, this calculation is essentially a starting point to dig deeper into the phenomenon of absenteeism, and to understand the causes of employee absenteeism at the T, particularly the highly impactful unscheduled absenteeism. The choice of the figures used in the numerator and denominator was to provide objectivity to this figure in order to illustrate a problem that needs further investigation, given its impact on customers and MBTA operating performance and costs.

The attached chart provides a snapshot of the different leave categories used at the MBTA and their associated rates.

How did the Panel compare MBTA absenteeism rates to absenteeism at other public transit agencies? Can we really say the T has unusually high absenteeism for the public transit industry?

There does not appear to be a commonly accepted standard for calculating transit agency absenteeism, and most agencies do not make their own rates publicly available, so the Panel did its best to put the rate of unscheduled absence at the MBTA into context. In doing so, however, the Panel was mindful that external benchmarks were limited in number and data quality, and could be helpful primarily in trying to determine whether the MBTA has an absenteeism challenge (which, given the association between unscheduled absences and dropped trips, it appears to have).

Nevertheless, the Panel found that average absenteeism – especially unscheduled – appears to be materially higher at the MBTA than other transit agencies.

The Panel's thought-process on this issue is laid out below:

- The unscheduled absentee rates at the MBTA appear to vary widely by role – from a low of 5% in some roles to a high of 19% for part time motor-persons.
- Absenteeism appears to be higher among those roles that are directly responsible for providing passenger service, which heightened the Panel's concern about the customer impact of absenteeism.
- The limited benchmark data available all suggest a high rate for MBTA vs. peers.
- The absolute number of unscheduled absences per year appears high relative to the Panel member's broad experience in many other organizations.

Does the Bureau of Labor Statistics data for absenteeism in the transportation industry provide a reasonable comparison, given that it includes so many different kinds of industries, like sightseeing tours?

Yes, the Panel believes that absentee rates across a variety of non-public sector transportation industries are quite important to understand as we try to turn around the MBTA's performance and attendance. The BLS data does indeed include many different kinds of industries – but the MBTA itself includes many different job types from customer service agents, to train operators, to

office/clerical staff, and executives/managers. As with all the other benchmark data, the Panel did not rely on it in isolation, but took the BLS data as one of many inputs, weighed it in discussions given its provenance and its applicability to the MBTA, and came to an overall view based on the overall set of data available. BLS data on absenteeism is simply one of those inputs.

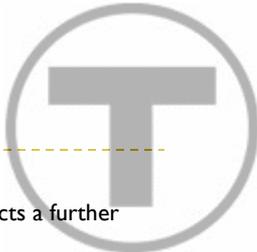
The BLS data, while wide-ranging for what it incorporates into its statistics, is a starting point to show that a variance exists between the T and other organizations, based on the information that is available.

Many people had to miss work during the storms of January and February. Isn't it unfair to penalize the MBTA staff who were unable to perform their jobs during that period?

The Panel recognized that the January and February period was very challenging for many in the Commonwealth. For that reason, the Panel looked at data on absenteeism and dropped trips covering a longer period of time, as shown in the attached charts.

The Panel found sufficient reason to be concerned about absenteeism at the MBTA, both as an indicator of management weaknesses and as a cause of poor performance and customer service. The absenteeism analysis also raised a number of troubling questions for the Panel: what do the absenteeism metrics for the MBTA suggest about employee morale, about agency management, and about the ability of the MBTA to control and compensate for absenteeism so that it does not negatively impact riders? These are all issues that a Fiscal & Management Control Board at the MBTA would tackle.

Days in Year	365	Work Days in Year	261
104 Regular Days Off	104	Average Employee Availability	204
FY14 Absences	57.27	Grand Total	22.51
	30.13	Vacation/Holiday/	Unscheduled Total
		Other Day Off	
Vacation	17.60	FMLA	7.56
Holiday	10.99	Sick	6.33
Compensatory	0.56	Reported Injury/Worker's Comp	3.68
Personal Day	0.51	Inactive	1.08
Other Day Off	0.47	ADA	1.04
	4.63	Sick Paid Protected	0.60
		Excused No Pay	0.52
		Bereavement	0.38
Training	2.19	Non-Authorized	0.29
Suspended	1.73	Waived	0.29
Military	0.26	Disqualified	0.28
Union Business	0.20	Unexcused	0.19
Jury Duty	0.14	SNLA	0.11
Parental	0.07	AWOL	0.07
Court-Ordered	0.02	Other Protected	0.04
Leave of Absence	0.02	Miss	0.03
		Red Miss	0.02



Source: MBTA Employee Availability Reports, FY2014

The analysis provided in *Back of Track: An Action Plan to Transform the MBTA* delineated the different categories of leave slightly differently. This table reflects a further understanding and refinement of the many categories of leave used at the MBTA.