



Mass Transit: A Career on the Move

By GEORGE FREE, Senior Member

Before I joined the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), my work was like that of most technical writers: I wrote documents and training materials for people using computers. It dawned on me that my job at the TTC was going to be different when my new supervisor called a few days before I began work. “Be sure to bring steel-toed safety boots,” he said. Several days later I found myself in the subway tunnels of Toronto learning how to avoid trains and stepping on the 600-volt power rail.

A network of bus, subway, and streetcar routes, the TTC serves more than 440 million customers annually. I’m a curriculum development specialist in the training department. I design and develop training for a wide variety of TTC employees, including bus, streetcar, and subway drivers; track maintainers; structure repair persons; mechanics; electricians; and supervisory staff. Most of them do not use computers on the job; training is largely skills-based and hands-on.

In the training department, we have over 100 instructors and offer over 160 courses every year. My responsibilities include a full range of technical writing and instructional design activities, including needs analysis, design, development, and evaluation. Most of my time is devoted to writing manuals, job aids, lesson plans, and other instructional materials. I create these materials working with instructors who are assigned to course development projects as subject matter experts.

While some training is conducted in classrooms, much of it takes place in the field. An operator learns to drive a bus not by sitting in a classroom but through guided practice driving on the street. A track maintainer learns to use power tools safely through hands-on demonstration. A route supervisor learns to reroute buses and manage the runs by getting out on the route.

Behind the Wheel

Developing this kind of training is always interesting. While I’m most often typing away in my office, I have frequent adventures.

In addition to walking in subway tunnels, I have visited carhouses where subway cars and streetcars are repaired and rebuilt, large bus garages serving our fleet of over 1,800 conventional and paratransit buses, and numerous construction sites and other work locations. One memorable day, I learned the ins and outs of driving a streetcar. I also enjoyed consulting with a community advisory group to improve our training on customer service for people with disabilities.

Best Practices and New Technology

Since our training is largely of the traditional, instructor-led type, we may be a bit behind the times in our use of instructional technology. While we have begun to explore computer-based training for some limited applications, our training products are largely print-based. But this limitation has also been an advantage, since we have been able to focus on improving the quality of our content. Over the last few years, we have made our manuals and workbooks easier to use and read by following best practices in structured writing, clear language, and document and graphic design.

This is not to say that we aren’t using new technology in our training. Recently, we purchased a bus simulator, and one of my current assignments is to integrate simulated driving scenarios into our bus driver training. We are also looking forward to using subway and streetcar simulators as well as adding multimedia technology to our classrooms.

Looking back on my career as a technical writer, I can only say you never know where your career will take you. While working at the TTC, I have discovered a fascinating behind-the-scenes world of mass transit and a training world that I barely knew existed. **i**

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