



The 2026

# STATE OF BUS DRIVER RETENTION IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

+



INSIGHTS FROM 400 DRIVERS  
ON WHAT MAKES THEM STAY



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# Introduction

Around the world, public transport systems are running short on the people who keep them moving. The global urban transit workforce ([roughly 9 million strong](#)) is already facing a shortage of nearly [2.4 million jobs](#) due to service expansion, population growth, and mounting retirements. According to a joint [UITP and ITF study](#), **1 in 4 transit workers worldwide will retire by 2035**, putting additional pressure on both recruiting and retaining skilled bus operators.

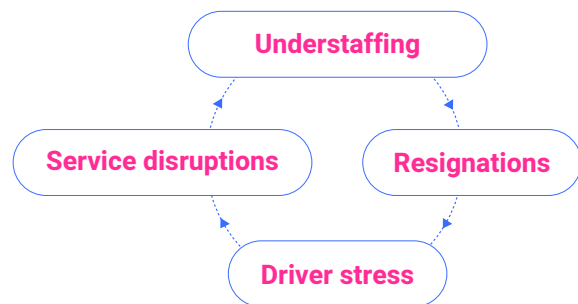
This is no longer just a workforce issue; it is a service continuity risk. When transportation providers can't staff runs, the impact shows up immediately: cancelled or shortened trips, more forced overtime for remaining drivers, and rising passenger complaints and safety concerns.

Behind these numbers is a human story. Bus operators describe schedules that change with little notice, shifts that stretch into unsustainable overtime, and communication that feels one-way.

**Many still value the purpose of the job, but not at the cost of sleep, family time, or health. When every week starts with uncertainty, burnout stops being an exception and becomes an expectation.**

Our survey quantifies what many providers already sense: drivers experiencing unpredictable schedules are significantly more likely to plan leaving within 2-3 years, while those who feel heard report higher job satisfaction even in challenging environments.

## The Burnout Cycle



The survey findings point to a clear path forward. Drivers want to stay; **64.5% report they're likely to remain with their current employer if conditions improve.** What's needed is the operational commitment to make staying sustainable.

## The Path Forward

The top retention strategies - scheduling, communication, workload management - are operational decisions agencies control. Unlike compensation, these can be addressed through better processes and modern tools.

**When drivers thrive, transportation systems do too.**



# Methodology

This report is based on a survey of **400 full-time city bus drivers** across North America, the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Germany, all employed at public agencies or private operators operating **20 or more buses**.

Respondents were screened for role relevance and tenure, and completed a structured questionnaire covering schedule predictability, communication quality, fatigue and overtime, job satisfaction, and retention likelihood.

The survey included 15 analytical questions plus qualifying and verification items, with quality controls to remove inconsistent responses. Findings reflect both overall trends and cross-tab analysis **linking predictability, communication, and overtime patterns to satisfaction and intent to stay**, providing a robust view of the workforce pressures shaping today's transit operations.

# Executive Summary

## 7 Survey Insights, one Clear Message

**This study identifies the precise operational factors that determine whether drivers stay or leave, and quantifies exactly how much each one matters.**

**Schedule predictability** creates a **2x** difference in job satisfaction. Drivers with predictable schedules report **76%** satisfaction compared to significantly lower rates among those facing constant uncertainty.

**Communication quality** acts as a retention anchor. An improvement from "poor" to "good" dispatch communication shifts retention intent by 15 percentage points, with **80%** of drivers rating communication highly planning to stay.

**The overtime threshold** is 6 shifts per month. Below it, **66%** of drivers remain satisfied. Above it, satisfaction collapses by half as work becomes unsustainable.

**Fair scheduling processes** reduce turnover risk to **5%**. When drivers believe the process is equitable, they're **6x** more likely to stay compared to those who view it as unfair.

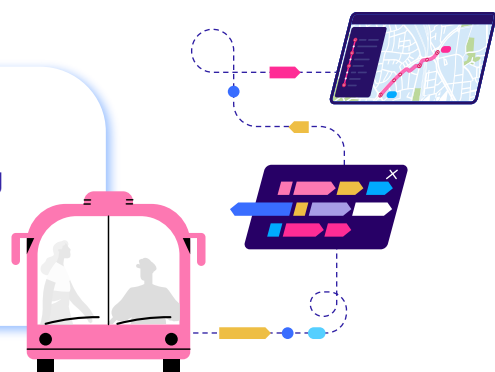
**Synchronized information** prevents daily stress. Drivers with excellent communication are **16x** less likely to face passenger conflicts daily than those operating without adequate information.

**Mobile tools have unexpected champions.** Veteran drivers with 15+ years experience show the highest demand (**93%**) for self-service apps, contradicting assumptions about technology resistance.

**Real-world planning** protects sustainability. When schedules reflect actual operating conditions rather than ideal scenarios, the chronic time pressure that erodes breaks and extends shifts disappears.

### The good news?

These operational improvements are already working at transit systems implementing them, and the tools to support them are increasingly accessible.

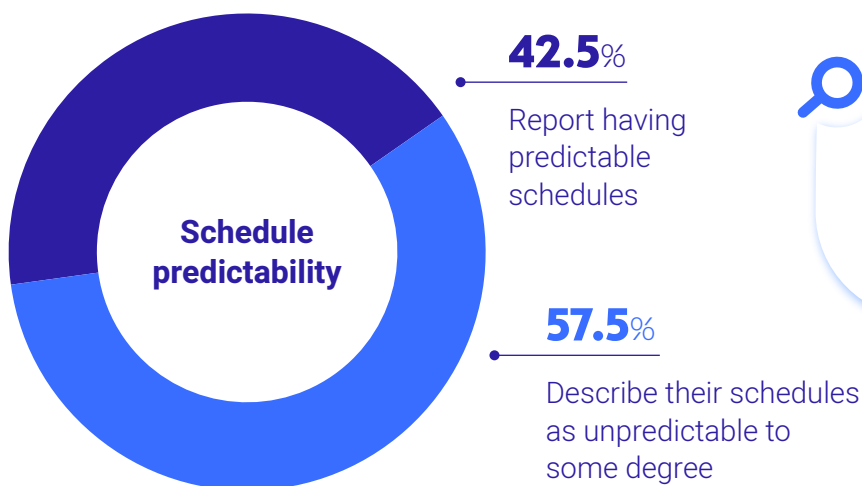


# 1 Schedule Unpredictability Drives Turnover

## The Problem: **Instability**

A driver's schedule shapes everything: sleep patterns, family time, income stability, and long-term health. When schedules feel unpredictable or inflexible, retention collapses.

## The Data: **Unpredictability**

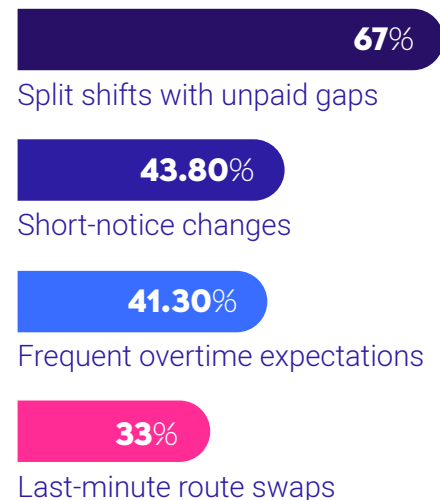


Notably, drivers with predictable schedules are **2x** more likely to be satisfied with their jobs than those without.

**60.5%** Specifically cite schedule unpredictability as a reason operators leave their employers.

This ranks schedule predictability alongside pay (**55.8%**) and overtime/fatigue (**71.3%**) as the top three departure reasons.

### Top Schedule Frustrations:



## The Impact: **Driver Turnover Costs**

**Research shows** turnover rates average 30% among privately contracted operators and can reach as high as 80% for paratransit operations, with each **departure costing between \$10,000-\$30,000** in recruitment, training, and lost productivity. Shift workers with unpredictable schedules experience absenteeism rates **20-30%** higher than those with fixed rosters.

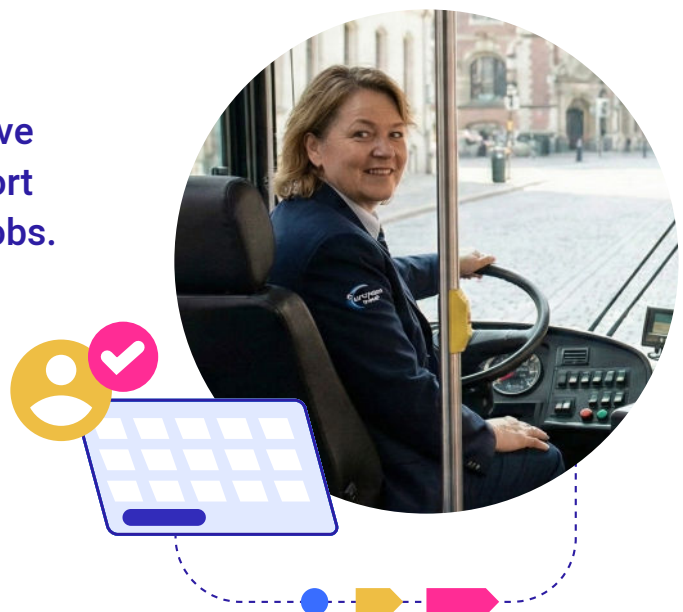
**Split shifts are particularly problematic**, as they create unpaid gaps in the middle of the day that make it impossible for drivers to maintain other commitments or even return home. Traditional manual scheduling systems are made for vehicle efficiency and service coverage, not for human sustainability. The result: schedules that look efficient on paper create daily chaos in practice.

## The Solution: **Human-Centric Duty Design**

Employers addressing unpredictability are exploring scheduling approaches that consider driver wellbeing:

- ★ **Fatigue-aware shift patterns:**  
Spacing out early/late shifts with adequate recovery time between duties
- ★ **Preference incorporation:**  
Finding ways to include driver input during schedule creation. [Chapel Hill Transit](#) achieved a 20% decrease in turnover through this approach
- ★ **Visible equity:**  
Making shift distribution transparent so fairness can be verified
- ★ **Advance visibility:**  
Providing earlier access to schedules and clearer protocols for changes

**76%** of drivers who have predictable schedules report being satisfied with their jobs.



## 2 Communication Gaps Amplify Daily Stress

**100%**

*of drivers surveyed must explain delays to passengers without having accurate information themselves.*

**20.5%** *face this daily.*

### The Problem: **One-Way Flow**

When communication only flows in one direction, drivers feel isolated and unsupported. Poor information flow creates operational friction and erodes trust.

### The Data: **Information Gaps**

**64%**

Receive late or unclear notifications about service changes

**64%**

Cite difficulty reaching dispatch when needed

**40.2%**

Report inconsistent messaging from supervisors

**24.8%**

Cite passenger complaints caused by poor/outdated information

### The Impact: **Isolated Drivers**

**Communication breakdowns affect agencies of all sizes:**

| Agency Size   | Report Poor Incident Communication |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 20-100 buses  | <b>70.4%</b>                       |
| 101-200 buses | <b>63.5%</b>                       |
| 201+ buses    | <b>57.5%</b>                       |



The consistency across agency sizes suggests that the issue isn't scale, but rather the tools and processes used to coordinate operations. Using fragmented systems (text messages, radio calls, bulletin boards) creates gaps where information gets lost or delayed. Critically, these systems flow one way: drivers receive updates but have limited ability to report issues or receive acknowledgment.

Without accurate, timely information, drivers absorb complaints from passengers that they can't address, creating emotional strain that accumulates and contributes to burnout.

**Drivers who rate the quality of communication as poor are significantly more likely to express dissatisfaction and indicate an intention to leave.**

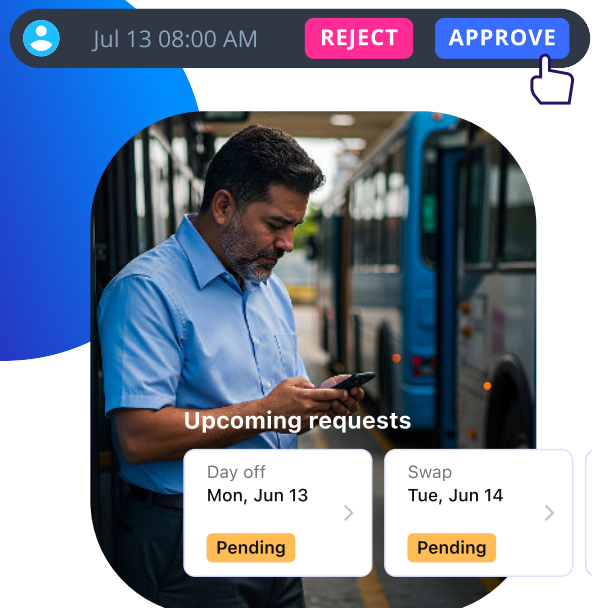
## The Solution: **Two-Way Systems**

Closing communication gaps requires rethinking how information flows:

- ★ **Instant updates:**  
Finding ways to push service changes to drivers without delay
- ★ **Direct contact methods:**  
Moving beyond radio-only systems to give drivers options for reaching dispatch
- ★ **Documented feedback:**  
Creating ways for drivers to report issues and see what happened with them
- ★ **Proactive notifications:**  
Detecting disruptions early and alerting relevant parties quickly

### The Communication Anchor

**80%** of drivers who rate dispatch communication as "Good" or "Excellent" intend to stay with their employer.



# 3 Overtime Has Become Normalized & Unsustainable

**71.3%**

*of drivers identify overtime and fatigue as a top reason operators leave — yet **38.0%** work unscheduled overtime 6-10+ times monthly.*

## The Problem: **Burnout Loop**

Overtime has shifted from an occasional necessity to an operational norm, creating a loop that accelerates burnout and turnover.

## The Data: **Chronic Overwork**

Number of hours drivers work beyond scheduled hours per month

**71.3%**

Identify overtime and fatigue as a top reason to leave their employer.

**3.5%**

11+ times

**57%**

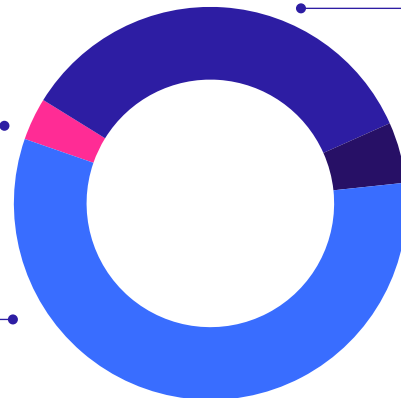
3-5 times

**34.5%**

6-10 times

**5%**

1-2 times

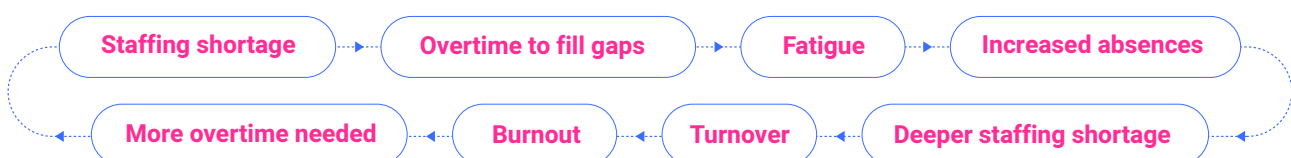


## The Impact: **Self-Perpetuating Cycle**

Studies show that fatigue-related absences in North America have increased by over 20% in the past five years. Research from [UITP and the International Transport Workers' Federation](#) indicates that 45% of drivers work beyond their scheduled hours at least once a week. In many major cities, 10-15% of total driver time is overtime. At some agencies, [overtime pay accounts for 10% of personnel expenses](#) and has reached as much as a quarter of total bus operator wages.

**Our survey confirms that this has become the operational norm: **94.8%** of drivers now work unscheduled overtime at least three times every month.**

**The cycle perpetuates itself:**



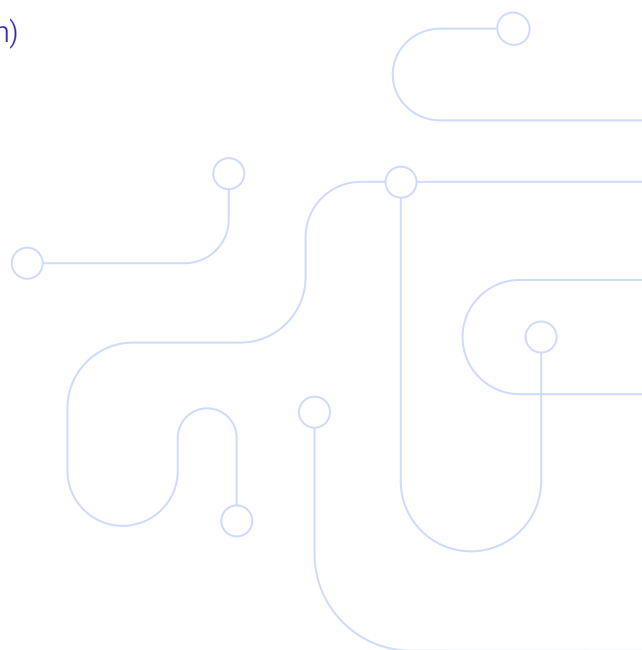
The human cost of this cycle is quantifiable. Drivers working consistent overtime report significantly lower job satisfaction and a greater likelihood of leaving within 2-3 years.

**Satisfaction scores drop by nearly half** the moment a driver crosses the threshold into the "Burnout Zone" (6 or more overtime shifts per month). **While 66% of drivers with moderate overtime (3-5 times/month) report being satisfied, that number plummets to just 35% for those working high-frequency overtime.**

### The Burnout Zone by Country

(Percentage of drivers working overtime 6-10+ times/month)

| Country     | Drivers in the "Burnout Zone" (%) |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| Switzerland | 61.5%                             |
| Italy       | 57.5%                             |
| Austria     | 46.2%                             |
| US          | 43.2%                             |
| Germany     | 42.9%                             |
| Canada      | 40.6%                             |
| UK          | 34.2%                             |
| Portugal    | 25%                               |
| Spain       | 17.5%                             |



## The Solution: Sustainable Workload

Breaking the overtime cycle requires visibility into workload before it becomes chronic:

- ★ **Hours tracking:**  
Monitoring cumulative working time to spot patterns early
- ★ **Fatigue indicators:**  
Watching for shift sequences that create exhaustion risk
- ★ **Workload redistribution:**  
Having processes to rebalance duties when overload appears
- ★ **Recovery enforcement:**  
Protecting rest periods between shifts, especially after long hours

**66%** of drivers working moderate overtime (3-5 times/month) remain satisfied. Overtime doesn't have to be the enemy of retention. The data shows a clear threshold: **as long as agencies keep unscheduled overtime below 6 shifts per month, they can maintain high satisfaction levels.**

# 4 Real-Time Operations Support Separates Chaos From Control

## The Problem: **Crisis Isolation**

How agencies respond when disruptions occur determines whether drivers feel supported or isolated. Even the best schedule meets reality the moment a bus leaves the depot.

## The Data: **Poor Incident Response**

**66%**

Rate communication during incidents as "poor" or "neutral"

**70%**

struggle to reach dispatch when they need assistance

**100%**

Regularly face situations managing passenger frustration without operational support



Drivers who rate the quality of communication as poor are **1.4x** more likely to express intent to leave compared to those who feel well-supported.

## The Impact: **Reactive Management**

Traditional operations management separates planning from execution. When disruptions occur, response is reactive: supervisors become aware of incidents 10-20 minutes after drivers begin managing alone. Supervisors lack context about cumulative workload, different teams work from different systems, and incident data rarely flows back to improve future planning.

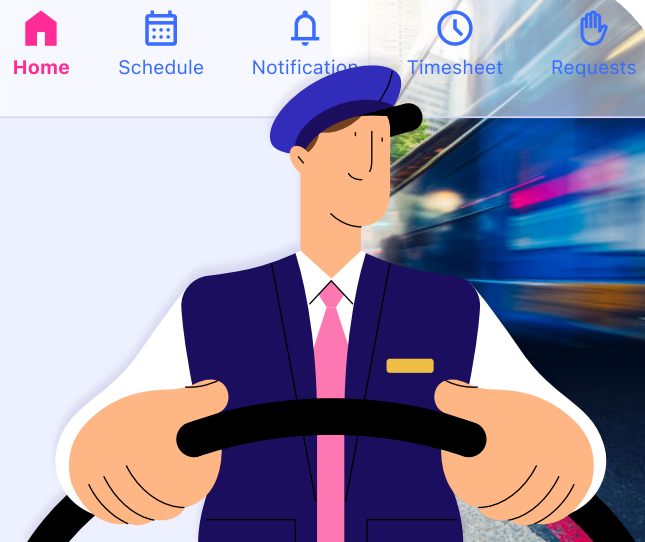


# The Solution: **Connected Operations**

Better incident response comes from connecting operational information:

- ★ **Fleet visibility:**  
Making vehicle locations and schedule status accessible to operations staff
- ★ **Incident tracking:**  
Logging all disruptions with context in one place
- ★ **Coordinated changes:**  
Enabling route adjustments and passenger communications to happen together
- ★ **Direct driver contact:**  
Creating faster pathways for dispatch to reach drivers during disruptions

Despite the physical and operational pressures, nearly **2/3** of the industry's most experienced operators want to stay— if employers provide better incident response and reduce operator isolation.



When asked about what would improve their daily experience, bus drivers said:



**If there was someone available who listens and has your back, a lot of the stress would go down. ”**

★ Carmel, E. (2025). *Why do bus drivers leave the profession?*  
Working paper, research conducted for a national public transport authority.

# 5 Driver Empowerment Through Self-Service and Autonomy

**84%**

*say mobile self-service tools would be "valuable" or "very valuable," yet most still rely on bulletin boards and phone trees.*

## The Problem: **Disempowerment**

When drivers can't easily access information or take simple actions without supervisor approval, they feel disempowered and disengaged.

## The Data: **Limited Access**

**84%**

say a mobile app providing schedule updates, dispatch communication, and payroll visibility would be "valuable" or "very valuable"

**64%**

currently receive late or unclear notifications about service changes

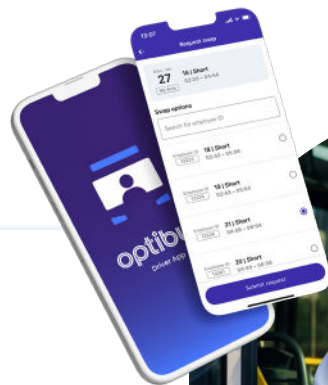
**39%**

cite shift swap processes as a top frustration

Communication gaps consistently rank among the top three frustrations. Drivers lacking access to updated schedules or incident alerts report feeling isolated and unsupported - and they're more likely to leave.



**Drivers with 15+ years of experience are more eager for a mobile support app (93%) than drivers with 4-8 years of experience (73%).**



## The Impact: **Lost Autonomy**

Many transit systems operate on information distribution models designed decades ago - bulletin boards, paper rosters, phone trees. A [recent webinar survey](#) revealed that 48% of North American transportation providers still manage their driver bidding processes via printed papers or pen-and-paper methods.

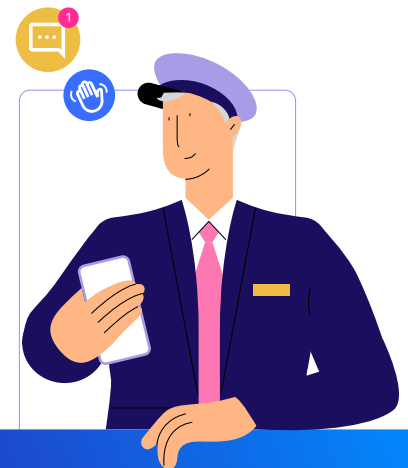
This creates reduced flexibility (drivers get stuck with schedules conflicting with personal needs), information anxiety (drivers constantly worry about what they might have missed), loss of control (every question requires calling a supervisor), and eroded trust (tight information control sends an implicit message of distrust).

**Drivers citing "lack of input into roster preferences" and "complicated shift processes" as frustrations rate overall job satisfaction lower and express uncertainty about staying**

## The Solution: **Self-Service Access**

Giving drivers direct access to information and routine actions:

- ★ **Schedule access:**  
Letting drivers view their schedules without calling in
- ★ **Shift flexibility:**  
Enabling drivers to request swaps or bid on shifts without supervisor approval for routine requests
- ★ **Push notifications:**  
Sending service alerts and updates directly to drivers
- ★ **Direct messaging:**  
Creating logged communication channels with dispatch
- ★ **Payroll visibility:**  
Providing transparent access to hours and pay information



One of the most positive findings in our study is the enthusiasm for technology among experienced drivers.

Far from being "tech-resistant," veteran operators are the loudest voices calling for mobile apps to manage shift swaps and payroll visibility.

# 6 Passenger Information Quality Directly Impacts Driver Stress

## The Problem: **Information Mismatch**

Drivers become the frontline of frustration when communication breaks down between agencies and passengers. When passenger information systems and driver communications aren't synchronized, drivers absorb complaints they can't address.

## The Data: **Frontline Frustration**

100%

Must explain service delays or changes to passengers without having accurate real-time information themselves (20.5% daily, 59% multiple times weekly)

64%

Receive late or unclear notifications about service changes

24.8%

Cite passenger complaints caused by poor information as a top communication gap

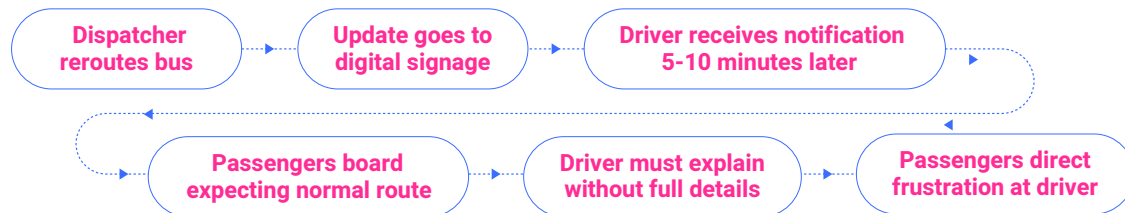
Drivers who rate dispatch communication as **"Poor"** are **16x more** likely to have to explain service delays to passengers daily compared to those who rate communication as **"Good."**



# The Impact: **Misaligned Systems**

In traditional operations, passenger information systems and driver communication channels operate independently. When dispatchers make operational changes, they may update one system but not the other, or update both with different timing.

**The common scenario repeats daily:**



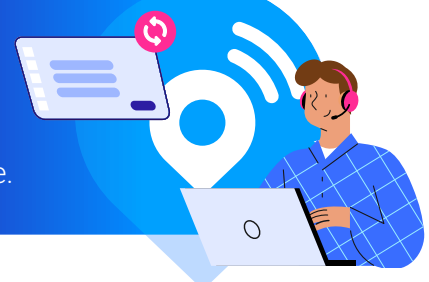
Without synchronized information, drivers are expected to provide customer service while lacking the information to do so, being held accountable for system failures beyond their control. **Survey data shows as passenger interaction stress increases, job satisfaction decreases, and turnover intent rises proportionally.**

# The Solution: **Information Synchronization**

Eliminating the passenger-driver gap requires coordinating updates:

- ★ **Single source:**  
Having one authoritative place where service information is managed
- ★ **Simultaneous distribution:**  
Ensuring drivers and passengers receive updates at the same time
- ★ **Real-time accuracy:**  
Feeding actual vehicle locations into passenger information
- ★ **Specific details:**  
Providing clear reasons for delays rather than vague messages
- ★ **Integrated updates:**  
Connecting scheduling changes to passenger displays. **Dr. Richard** in Austria reduced update implementation time by 75%, completing timetable changes in under a day through this approach

**High-quality communication reduces frontline delay explanations by 16x.** Drivers with excellent dispatch communication face significantly less passenger conflict, turning a high-stress role into a manageable, professional service.



# 7 Realistic Network Planning Protects Driver Sustainability

## The Problem: **Unrealistic Plans**

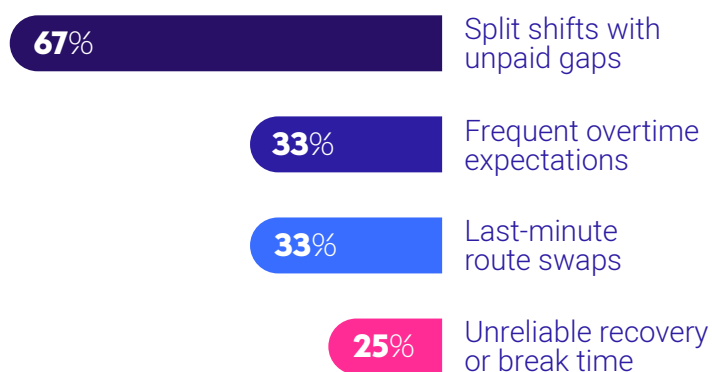
Timetables built on ideal conditions rather than real-world data create duties that appear achievable on paper but prove unsustainable in practice. The result: chronic time pressure, eroded breaks, and driver exhaustion.

## The Data: **Schedule Pressure**

The survey identifies a clear "Fairness Gap" where the quality of the planning process directly predicts turnover:

- ✦ Drivers who are "Very Dissatisfied" with the scheduling process are **6x** more likely to plan on leaving compared to those who are "Satisfied".
- ✦ Drivers experiencing consistent schedule pressure and unpredictability are **2.6x** more likely to report an intent to leave within the next two years.

### Top Frustrations Rooted in Planning:



**Split shifts remain the #1 frustration for 67% of drivers, regardless of whether their schedule is otherwise predictable or unpredictable.**

These interconnected frustrations reveal a common root cause: planning processes that systematically underestimate actual work requirements.

## The Impact: **Paper vs Reality**

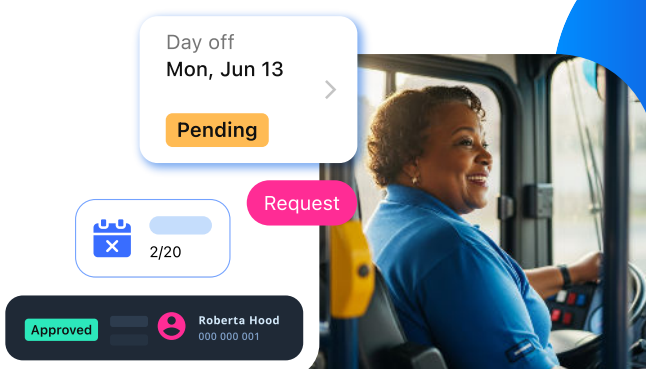
Traditional network planning relies on historical schedules, manual calculations, and travel time assumptions based on ideal conditions. This creates timetables assuming clear traffic and no delays, but when every route is scheduled to the minute with no buffer, any disruption creates system-wide pressure. Statutory breaks exist in schedules, but operational delays consume them, forcing drivers to choose between maintaining timetables or taking required rest.

**The result:** schedules appear balanced on paper but create chronic stress in practice. Drivers fall behind through no fault of their own, skip breaks to catch up, face passenger complaints for delays beyond their control, and finish shifts exhausted. **The 33% citing frequent overtime often describe situations where extra hours aren't voluntary, but the inevitable result of schedules systematically underestimating actual work time.**

## The Solution: **Reality-Based Planning**

Building achievable schedules requires using actual performance data:

- ★ **Historical analysis:**  
Reviewing months of operational data to understand real travel times
- ★ **Realistic assumptions:**  
Planning based on typical performance (e.g., 85th percentile) rather than ideal conditions
- ★ **Protected breaks:**  
Identifying where recovery time is needed and preventing operational pressure from eroding it
- ★ **Balanced workload:**  
Examining total duty demands to ensure equitable distribution
- ★ **Feedback loops:**  
Using operational outcomes to inform future planning decisions



Drivers who believe the planning process is fair are **6x more likely to stay**. At employers where the scheduling process is transparent and satisfactory, the "leave risk" drops to a mere **5%**

# Conclusion

## A Workforce Ready to Stay

This survey reveals something unexpected: an industry not in decline, but on the verge of transformation. The bus drivers who keep transit systems moving aren't asking for the impossible. They're asking for what every sustainable workplace requires - **predictability, communication, and respect for human limits.**

**The path forward is visible in the data. When schedules become more predictable, driver satisfaction jumps to 76%.** When dispatch communication improves from poor to good, intent to stay increases by **15%**. When overtime stays below 6 shifts per month, **2 out of 3** drivers surveyed remain satisfied with their work. These aren't marginal gains; they're fundamental shifts in workforce stability.

What makes this moment hopeful is that the improvements drivers need are increasingly within reach. The technology to build fatigue-aware schedules, synchronize passenger and driver information, and provide mobile self-service already exists and is becoming more accessible. The planning methodologies that use real-world data instead of ideal assumptions are proven. The communication platforms that create two-way dialogue are available today.

**Most encouraging of all: 64.5% of drivers say they're willing to stay if conditions improve. This isn't a workforce looking for the exit; it's a workforce committed to the mission and ready to continue. The veteran operators with 15+ years of experience are among the most enthusiastic about modern tools and better processes.**

The opportunity is clear. Driver retention challenges that once seemed intractable now have practical, operational solutions. As transit systems adopt new approaches to scheduling, communication, and workload management, they're discovering that small changes create outsized impact on workforce stability.

The agencies already leading the way aren't necessarily those with the largest budgets or newest fleets. They're the ones recognizing workforce management as core infrastructure, as essential to reliable service as the vehicles themselves. They're embracing processes designed around human sustainability alongside operational efficiency. They're creating environments where experienced operators want to build their careers.

The workforce shortage affecting public transit globally doesn't have to be permanent. **Behind the statistics about global shortages and retirement waves is an encouraging truth: drivers want to stay.** They value the purpose of their work. They take pride in keeping their communities moving. The operational environment is evolving to support that commitment.

**The future of public transit depends on the people who drive it. This survey shows they're ready to be part of that future - and that the tools and approaches to support them are increasingly available and proven.**

# How to Address Driver Retention Challenges

The operational challenges identified in this study are precisely what Optibus is designed to solve.

**Predictable, Transparent Scheduling:** Fatigue-aware scheduling algorithms that balance operational efficiency with driver wellbeing, incorporating preferences, and visualizing shift distribution.

**Quality Communication:** Mobile apps that provide real-time schedule visibility, instant service alerts, and direct dispatch communication, transforming one-way bulletin boards into dynamic two-way dialogue.

**Sustainable Workload:** Live monitoring that tracks driver hours, rest compliance, and cumulative fatigue, enabling proactive intervention before burnout occurs.

**Real-Time Support:** Unified operations platforms that give supervisors full context during disruptions, enabling coordinated responses that support drivers rather than leaving them isolated.

**Driver Empowerment:** Self-service tools for schedule access, shift swaps, and payroll visibility that give drivers autonomy without requiring supervisor approval for routine actions.

**Unified Platform:** Integrated systems where updates reach drivers and passengers simultaneously, eliminating the information gaps that create daily stress.

**Data-Driven Planning:** Data-driven tools that use actual operational performance rather than ideal assumptions to build achievable schedules with protected breaks.

## The Integration Advantage

What makes these solutions effective is integration. Optibus connects planning, scheduling, rostering, operations, and communication in one platform, so improvements in one area reinforce the others. Optibus customers report measurable gains in driver satisfaction, reduced overtime costs, lower turnover rates, and more stable operations.



# About Optibus

Optibus is a unified software platform for public transportation planning, scheduling, rostering, operations, real-time control, and passenger information, powered by artificial intelligence (AI) and optimization algorithms. In thousands of cities worldwide, transportation agencies and operators use Optibus to maximize the positive impact of public transportation on passengers and the planet, improve operational efficiency and service quality, promote transportation equity, reduce emissions and costs, and modernize operations.

Learn more: [www.optibus.com](http://www.optibus.com) | [info@optibus.com](mailto:info@optibus.com)

