

## Technology Decisions

### The When and How of Effectively Utilizing a Consultant

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Sheryl: Welcome to our podcast today. This is Sheryl Gross-Glaser and we have Marlene Connor. Marlene is a transportation consultant and she also serves as the Chair of the APTA mobility management committee. Marlene can you tell us a little bit about your experience and background?

Marlene: Sure Sheryl, and I would start by saying that my background actually entails both work in the public sector and the private sector. I started my transportation career on the public transit side as a planner for regional planning agency and eventually regional transit authority, where I became the CEO for the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority in Springfield, Massachusetts. I have been consulting now for the last 15 or so years and have worked on a variety of projects around the country in that role.

Sheryl: I am going to be talking with Marlene this morning about the consultant's role in technology decisions and design. So Marlene, what do you see that role to be? What do you think the value of having a consultant is when you are designing a technology project?

Marlene: I think that probably the most important thing to recognize about the role of technology within our industry is that it's a really quickly evolving process. The years that I have been involved in the industry the technology has come amazingly far and can do an awful lot of things. It can help transit agencies, community transit agencies, regional agencies both manage things differently and better internally as well as communicate better externally.

It allows a lot of things to happen now that really were more traumatic years ago. So I think the important role now in implementing and instituting technology within an organization is really meaning to understand what it is that you want the technology to do. I think an important role for the consultancy side here is to work to help transit agencies, community agencies, really understand what it is that they need to do so that the technology is brought onboard in a way that can be beneficial and helpful and meet the needs that you really want it to meet rather than to get something that's – you don't need to buy too much.

You don't want to go, you don't want to have too little ability or functionality in this system but you don't need to over commit the things that you are not going to be able to use. So it's really a process of discerning the functionalities that you need and want and how to make that work. So consultants who understand the abilities of the technologies because it is sort of a moving target as it changes; it really provides an ability for transit agencies to step back to think through the basic functions and move on.

Sheryl: So it sounds like you are a very helpful link because you know what technology exists, you know what it can do and you are helping the transportation providers or the transit system client define their goal and what they need the technology to do for them.

Marlene: Correct, technology can be a little overwhelming if it's not something that you are used to having and it's not just the fact of having this system; but you want to get a system in place that's going to be able to be easily accessed and used by folks within your program. So it really has got to be a conscious effort to understand what it is that you are getting, how it can work and how it can help.

It's frustrating when you see people make mistakes by either investing in things that they don't need or not understanding how to use what they have purchased or just something that sits on a shelf and doesn't really benefit anybody.

Sheryl: And why does the role of training staff when you are making these decisions or after you have bought a technology package?

Marlene: I think training is really critical and it's important to work with vendors, the software or hardware vendors with regard to the training. And you want to set up the training so that the people that are going to be implementing and using the systems on a day-to-day basis can make full utilization of the systems.

A lot of systems have defaults, but defaults don't really give you the full capabilities of the systems. So, see you want to be able to take full advantage of the things that you invested in. Training is really an important component. You can't just get a system, flip a switch and it works. You have to really understand it and make really good use of it because they can be really helpful in a lot of different ways with regards to communicating both internally and externally.

But in order to do that you need to be, staff needs to be trained and comfortable with using the pieces of this system that you implement.

Sheryl: Can you talk a little bit about interoperability, what it is, and why it is important?

Marlene: Sure and I think that is one of the features that you really need to be paying attention to. I am working with a transit system now that has two different partners trying to work together. They are both using different software and nobody took the time to figure out how they could share information. So as a result, folks are meeting to double enter the same information. So the idea of being able to put pieces together. Many systems now can communicate and it's really important to be able to do that.

Some software systems have been really hesitant about creating open architecture that allows that interoperability, but I think it's in the transit industry's best interest to continue to move towards interoperability because over time if you add more functions, add more programs, the more you add to this system you want these systems to be able to talk to each other so that there is not confusion and again so you don't lose any functionality of the program.

Sheryl: Can you achieve any new trends in technology in terms of the internal or external communication or interaction with riders that you think people should know about?

Marlene: Do you want to try that again?

Sheryl: Okay sure, I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Any new trends in terms of communicating with your riders or apps, vehicles, anything like that?

Marlene: Oh absolutely, absolutely, there are so many apps that are coming online. You can't look at a blog any day and not see a new app that's being developed. They are being developed and I think the new part of why this is going to be important, the ability to communicate with customers. When we first started building one call/one click centers or even back to the old MSAA, the idea was to be able to have the partnering agencies put all the information together about the services into this sort of concierge or sort of warehouse setup.

In reality, where the new trend is that customers want to be able to know what is out there, but they want to be able to choose for themselves. So any number of applications, which regard to where is my bus or how do I get there, or how do I get from one mode to another. There are just innumerable applications that are out there. It's really important, I think, for transit systems to understand sort of the both sides of the technology.

Its really good to be able to coordinate your own information both from administrative or functional perspective but its equally as important to make sure you can communicate to customers because at the end of the day I think with a lot of younger people they want to pick up their phone and know what is happening without having to make a phone call or without having to go a computer.

So that communication process is just exploding. I think that is really sort of the newest trend in the technology is that piece. It is whether it's communicating with the rideshare function or a transit function or a pair of transit providers all of the pieces need to be in place. Folks just want to know how to access and they don't want to have to think about it and they don't want to have to wonder and they don't want to have to wait somewhere to figure it out. They just want to press the button and have the information.

Twitter is great and there is a bunch of different features out there that allow you to communicate, but that is really important.

Sheryl: Okay and can you give us some examples of where you felt that being a consultant you provided that valuable link between a transportation provider and the technology vendor to really add value to what the client got in terms of the technology purchasing and design?

Marlene: Yeah, actually, I would kind of fall back on an example where we helped a transportation program work to design a functional specification. They were interested in establishing a one call/one click center in an area that was a multi county rural area. So rather than put together a standard spec that said we want this piece of equipment or that piece of equipment, what we designed with them was a functional specification which said we want a system that can help us do this and help us do this and help us do that and these are the functions that we have and these are the things that we want this system to be able to provide for us – by helping them create a functional specification.

They were then able to have the vendors come, different vendors come talk to them about how their systems could respond to the functions that the region was interested in. So they were able to purchase a system they liked, the system is up and running, and I thought that was a really nice way to approach how to help a number of agencies get what they wanted and not have to sort of go into the technology systems sort of picking off a shelf and I was pleased to be able to make that happen.

Sheryl: Well Marlene, thank you for speaking with us today. I think it's really important what you had to say about making sure the transportation providers understand what they are buying and how it will help them and make sure that they get the best value that they can in terms of technology because most of us in transportation are not the technology experts. So I think that's a really helpful role.

Marlene: Great I am happy to help and I think it's all really about mobility management and helping folks manage their systems and processes so always something I like doing.

Sheryl: Okay thanks and that's a great line to end it with and we will be talking to you soon.

Marlene: Okay thanks Sheryl.