

PARTICIPATION IN THE ORGANISATION OF WEEKEND BUS SERVICES

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Introduction

Small-sized private Irish road passenger firms have been engaging in entrepreneurial activities and developing their businesses in recent years. Services have grown in volume and sophistication in line with tourism development, whilst the advent of a nationwide school transport system created a formal role for private bus operators in rural areas. Officially, the smaller operators complement the nationwide scheduled rail and bus services provided by the state-owned Coras Iompair Eireann, by providing out-reach and link-up services.

Recognising the needs of young migrant workers, and in order to increase their markets, some private bus operators have recently developed innovative services to cater for the needs of the migrants or week-end commuters. These services have grown rapidly, indicating that they fulfil a distinct need. It is estimated that there are currently some 48 weekend commuter bus routes, carrying approximately 60,000 passengers per year, in some 90 vehicles¹.

The consumers of the service are truly commuters in Pickup and Town's (1983) terms as they are embarking on "fixed essential journeys from home to workplace", the only unusual feature being that the frequency of commuting is measured in units of weeks rather than of days. The legality of the services has been questioned by the national transport company Coras Iompair Eireann (CIE) in that, while the companies fulfil the letter of the law in that the individual trips are carried out on a private hire basis, they have many of the characteristics of scheduled services for which the companies are not licensed. Furthermore, the operators have been accused of "creaming" CIE's peak weekend market. Despite these criticisms the services provided have proved demand responsive and successful.

*The author is Lecturer in Personnel Management in the Department of Industrial Relations, University College Dublin. This article originates from a study by the Centre for Transport Studies UCD, on behalf of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, on the impact of participation by interested parties in decision making in transport for commuting. The full study, which also involved teams in Denmark, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, is due to be published in 1986.

The Research Focus

The weekend commuting service operated by a small successful private bus company is the subject of this study and was observed, to evaluate the degree of participation by all the parties involved in the service and to report on and analyse the process entailed. The objective was a report on the participation in decision making, which whether formal or informal, facilitated the provision of a service which is both "market" responsive and accountable to the passengers.

With this objective in view, an analytical framework within which to describe the process was constructed. Two paradigms of participation exist [Lovridge, 1980] — that of "constitutional pluralism" (in which the participation is seen as having a narrow instrumental approach to democracy), and that of "primitive democracy" (in which the individual achieves and sustains high levels of involvement). The small scale of the study, the small number of key actors in the process and the lack of a legislative framework constraining the process, facilitated a microspective approach.

The following parties interact in the provision or utilization of the weekend commuting services: the Commuters, the Public Servants Travel Club (PSTC), the Bus Company, and the Courier. In the context of the study a commuter was defined as any individual who books a seat, through the Travel Club, for one of the designated buses before it departs on Friday. The Public Servants Travel Club (PSTC) effectively acts as a booking office, accepting bookings from commuters and arranging schedules with the Bus Company. It also appoints a courier to each bus.

The PSTC was formed in 1975 in reaction to the high cost of travelling home at weekends for public servants working in urban areas but who wished to return to the rural areas from which they originated frequently at weekends. It was initially a voluntary organisation, and membership was conditional only on booking a seat on a weekend bus run by PSTC. The club started with one nucleus group running a small service but it later expanded as its popularity grew. As a result of this expansion one of the original founder members of the Club changed the status of the organisation from that of voluntary club to that of limited company. It now has a full-time staff of three.

The Bus Company is retained by the Travel Club to operate the designated routes. It employs a total of twenty-six fulltime non-union staff who have adopted a very flexible attitude to their job. Staff members tended to have different primary occupations i.e. painter, upholsterer,

mechanic, and were trained by the company to drive buses. Consequently, when not driving, the other skills prove invaluable to the company.

The couriers (predominantly female) are selected from among the regular travellers on the different routes. The courier collects the bus passenger list from PST on Thursday night, and as passengers arrive for the bus on Friday nights, formally checks them on. Mid-way on the journey, there is a stop for a tea break when the courier collects the fare from the individual commuters. This operation is effected off the bus, so as not to contravene the legislation, and is in fact the main reason for the tea break. The tea break is, however, also a very successful occasion for social interaction. In exchange for his/her service each courier is rewarded by a free return trip.

The Participation Process

Commuter participation is understood to occur when the users of the service, the commuters, take part in the management or organisation of the bus services². An ability to influence the decisions of the bus company and its intermediaries is implied. Figure 1 sets out the graduations of behavioural outcome which are possible in this study, as a function of the participation potential existing in the system, the participation propensity of the actors, and linkages between the two fostered by the PSTC couriers. participation potential is intended to mean providing the opportunity to participate, whilst propensity refers to the willingness and ability of those involved to participate. Using this relatively clear model and taking cognisance of the different paradigms of participation, the task became that of assessing the process of participation in the weekend commuter services. within the framework suggested by Figure 1.

Figure 1: Possible Loci of the Participation Process

| Participation Potential | | COMMUTERS | |
|-------------------------|------|-------------|-----------|
| | | HIGH | LOW |
| BUS COMPANY & PSTC | HIGH | Vitality | Formality |
| | LOW | Frustration | Apathy |

The exercise was particularly concerned to draw a distinction between commuter services which are simply market responsive, in that the initiative lies largely with the supplier of the services (and the motivation is substantially that of maximising the profitability of the service), and those which are market accountable, where the initiative lies with the user (through devices such as co-option of users to the bus company board, the decisions regarding service cancellation, etc.). There was also concern to assess more specifically the role of the courier (who is in the special position of having an allegiance to both the bus company /PSTC and the Commuters) in influencing the nature of the participation process.

The Case Study

In the case study, the focus of attention is on the manner in which formal and informal methods of participation are used to facilitate the provision of the weekend commuter service, to the satisfaction of all the actors involved. Information for the case study was collected through a combination of (i) a questionnaire based survey, (ii) personal interviews with the key actors, (iii) secondary sources, and (iv) observation. The questionnaire was designed to reflect the need to examine commuting in the context in which it occurs. As De Boer (1982) notes, "a movement cannot be regarded as an isolated event, but has to be studied in its relations to stationary activities". The questionnaire focussed on three themes: the social and work life of the commuters in Dublin during the working week, the actual travel process involved in weekend commuting and the impact and significance of commuting for the rural area itself.

The questionnaire was administered on three different bus trips serving the western region from Dublin, on a randomly selected weekend for which no significant market distortions caused by unusual events were anticipated. One hundred questionnaires were distributed, and eighty were returned completed. Data analysis was a combination of computer processing of the survey results and qualitative interpretation of additional information obtained from the various sources.

Based on the evidence of the survey, the commuters were predominantly female, well educated and working in the public service. Approximately 98% of the passengers interviewed were satisfied with the bus service. For these individuals their life, their family, friends and recreational activities existed in the country — they merely worked in Dublin.

The Role of Participation in the Decision Making Process

The survey showed that a very informal, but highly effective feedback system, is central to the decision making process in relation to this service.

This is backed up a formal system initiated by the PSTC. Of the two, the informal system of participation appears to be the more powerful. Central to the informal communication and feedback system is the courier. The courier's role emerged originally from the need to have various administrative tasks conducted on the journey, but it has now developed to the point where couriers provide a focal point for the passengers, and their link with both PSTC and the bus company. Couriers are recruited voluntarily from regular travellers and they are trained to look after bookings and to collect money. As such the courier is both a commuter and a representative of the PSTC and the bus company.

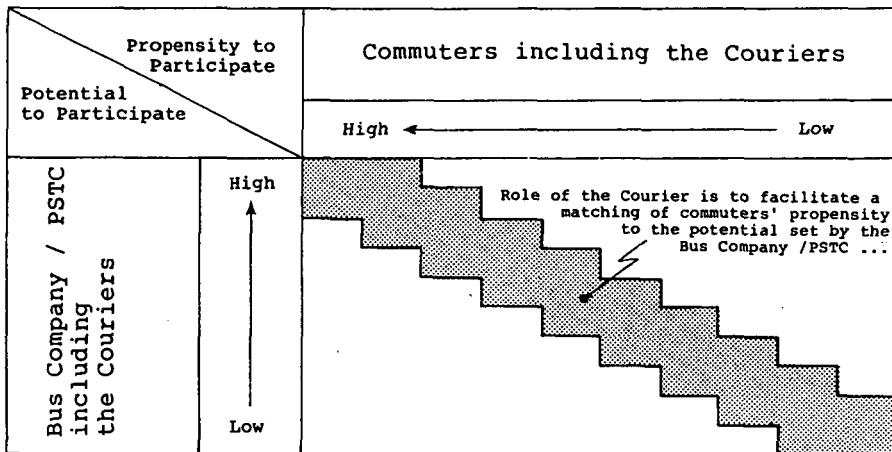
As the director of PSTC indicated, a good courier has now become essential to a good service. The courier ensures that passengers are collected and dropped off satisfactorily, and has a high level of contact with the passengers, the driver and PSTC. The courier is, therefore, the link between the success of the service and the satisfaction of the commuter. There is regular contact, usually by telephone, during the week between the courier and PSTC. Problems that may have occurred, or complaints and suggestions from passengers are discussed. Personal observations from the courier about the functioning of the service may also be discussed. On the Friday evening before departure the individual couriers meet a representative from PSTC in order to ensure that there are no problems, and each courier collects the passenger list for his/her particular bus on Thursday evening.

Reinforcing this strong informal system of feedback revolving around the courier, a strong sense of rapport exists between the passengers themselves, and between the passengers and the driver, who is seen as the direct representative of the bus company. This rapport appears to have developed from (a) the fact that many of the commuters travel the same route regularly and know each other well, (b) the demand responsive image of the service as projected by the driver's interest in the travel requirements of individuals and his willingness to adapt the itinerary where possible, and (c) a sense of loyalty to a firm willing to take a legal risk on behalf of its customers.

The role of the courier in maintaining an effective service is so pivotal that it affects all aspects of the participation process. Figure attempts to modify Figure 1 to reflect this feature of the study.

Quite often en route, the courier initiates a formal communication exercise, by distributing circulars from the PSTC office to the passengers informing them where the bus is scheduled to stop and the basic rules of the travel club. The information in the circulars is influenced strongly by

Figure 2: Representation of the role of the courier



feedback obtained by the couriers from previous passengers. The courier goes around the bus listening and responding to queries about times and destinations. Many examples were quoted illustrating the effectiveness of this process. On one route it was, for instance, discovered that passengers were unhappy about the departure and arrival times. A small survey was conducted and the times were changed to suit the passengers. Similarly, when PSTC initially commenced activity, it was the practice to deposit passengers in the centre of Dublin city on Sunday night. Many passengers, predominantly female, complained of the danger and inconvenience this entailed. Arrangements were made to re-route the buses through the main dwelling areas, thus leaving most passengers almost to their doorsteps.

There is also an important social dimension to weekend travelling for both the couriers and the passengers. For the passengers the commuting event itself acts as a social focus and a means of communication, with the homogenous nature of the group working to reduce the traditional dis-benefits of long distance travel. The couriers interviewed felt that being a courier had many positive aspects and that in particular it enabled them to widen their own circles of acquaintance.

On the basis of the above, it is evident that the bus company and PSTC, in conjunction with the couriers, have established an effective mechanism for participation and would appear to score high in terms of both propensity and potential as represented in Figures 1 and 2.

Attitudes of the Parties to the Participation Process

It is clear, from the foregoing information, that the process provides a degree of potential for all current passengers to become involved in the

service. A weakness is that there is no guarantee that current passengers are representative of the market as a whole, and of non-passengers in particular. Thus the process may not be efficient in detecting the travel needs of the potential, as opposed to the existing, market. In the on-bus survey, passengers were questioned concerning their perception of their own role in the decision making process. As Table 1 shows, 63% of respondents felt they were consulted regarding bus stopping locations, while 34% felt they were consulted regarding arrival and departure times. Upon further investigation, it was established that this response pattern was related to the fact that arrival and departure times tend to be fixed by office closing times in the case of the outward trips, and by social patterns in the case of the return trip.

A further question cross-checked on this position, by asking passengers about their wish to be consulted. Sizeable minorities expressed no wish to be consulted which was construed to indicate broad satisfaction with current procedures. The percentages of passengers wishing to be consulted about destination was 68%, which was similar to the percentage in Table 1 indicating they are consulted. However, the percentage wishing to be consulted about travel time was 59%, which was considerably higher than the percentage indicating they are consulted. This discrepancy seems to suggest a shortfall in the participative process. These figures highlight the 'Propensity' or willingness of the commuters using the service to participate in decisions regarding it.

Table 1: *Responses to questions regarding actual consultation on itinerary times and bus stopping locations*

| Actual Consultation | Departure/Arrival Times | | Bus Location Stops | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage |
| Yes Respondents | 25 | 34% | 47 | 63% |
| No Respondents | 47 | 66% | 28 | 37% |
| Total | 72 | 100% | 75 | 100% |

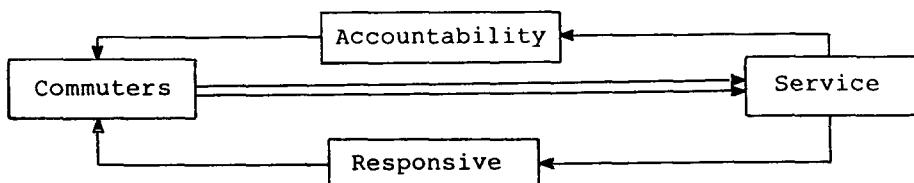
In response to a further question on their perception of their own influence, a majority of passengers accepted the bus company as the ultimate decision maker in matters of route and schedule design. This acknowledgement of the operator's central role in technical matters, irrespective of the level and format of participation by the other parties, highlights the fact that the bus company and PSTC control the participation potential and the extend and degree of participation, be it formal or informal. Regarding the attitudes of the participants to each

other, we detected no evidence of any resentments on the part of some groups of travellers in relation to itinerary changes made for other groups. This can possibly be attributed to the care which the service planners give to determining the balance of viewpoints and requirements, and also to the co-operative spirit engendered on the buses.

The Accountability Factor

A particular concern of the study was to draw a distinction between services which are merely market responsive and those that are both responsive and accountable. Companies following straightforward marketing strategy seek to assess the existence of potential markets via knowledge accumulated through market research. A market responsive service is one which adapts to changes in customers' needs, but with no direct involvement of the customer in the process of adaptation. At a further level of sophistication there is the concept of a market accountable service, in which there is some explicit regulation of the service itself by the customer, either through devices such as direct consultation, or through joint supplier/consumer decision making whether in formal or informal format (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *The Market Accountable Model*



Clearly services which are both accountable and responsive to the felt needs of all the parties involved are closest to the concept of participation within the terms of the study. To investigate this point, it was raised in interview with both the owner of the bus company and the director of PSTC. Questions were asked concerning the process by which the major route decisions relating to the service are made. Our understanding is that the basic approach in the case of new route selection is as follows. A new route is decided upon based on a preliminary assessment of likely numbers travelling each weekend and the adequacy of existing public transport services to the area in question. Much of this latter information is supplied by the PSTC and collected through the courier system. A tentative itinerary is constructed based on office closing times, estimated road travel times, and desired return times to Dublin based on past experience. During the early weeks of operation these arrangements are fine-tuned based on the revealed preferences of passengers. Gradually a

steady-state evolves, and thereafter the role of the participative process is (a) to pick up minor adjustments necessary to the operation, (b) to confirm that the operation pattern still satisfies the passengers.

In terms of Figures 1 and 2 it is clear that the bus owner and the PSTC maintain control of the participation potential, and at the route planning stage restrict the flow of information via the courier to the commuters. Effectively, a straightforward marketing approach is used in assessing route feasibility, but once a route is selected the communication process commences, and the commuter participation propensity is stimulated. A basic obstacle in achieving consensus between the parties is of course the physical scatter of the ultimate rural destinations of the commuters. A fundamental benefit of the participation process is therefore the co-operative spirit it engenders and the ease with which a balanced itinerary is achieved.

Regarding accountability, it was observed that it only becomes an important factor when a service is not responsive to commuter needs. To the extent that the bus company must continuously monitor commuter needs to maintain the service, it must regard itself as informally accountable to its passengers. In this, they are considerably dependent on the goodwill and continued co-operation of the couriers.

In basic terms, however, the weekend commuting service must be categorised as very responsive to the needs of commuters, but weak in terms of its formal accountability. Commuters are allowed, but do not have the right, to participate. The influence of the participants is limited in that PSTC and the bus owner have final decision making power. Participation in the weekend commuter service is informal, and there are no defined procedures by which commuters can have an absolute involvement in decisions about the service. While commuters can initiate new bus runs through convincing PSTC that there is a market, the final decision rests with PSTC and the bus company. There are indications, however, that the commuters could exert much greater pressure on the bus company/PSTC to participate in more strategic decision marking, but that they either do not recognise their collective power or possibly do not wish to do so.

These findings suggest that the process of participation in the weekend commuter bus service is broadly in line with the "constitutional pluralism" paradigm mentioned at the beginning of this article. This model expresses the view that, in a pluralist world, potential and propensity to participate are related to a temporary and simultaneous raising of consciousness of both a personal need (e.g. the commuter) and a sectional need (e.g. the bus owner, PSTC, groups of commuters).

The problem of service accountability raises many complex issues. A case could for instance be made that the establishment of more formal procedures with definite decision making powers would improve the quality of participation. However, this would also introduce a degree of formality into what is in reality and of essence a highly dynamic and flexible phenomenon. The nature of the present service is such that commuters are free to use alternative modes of transport or not to travel, whenever they wish. The present informal process of participation appears to meet the needs of the commuters, in that the on-bus survey indicated a high level of satisfaction with the process, to the extent that a sizable minority indicated no wish to be consulted further.

Observations from the Case Study

In the Irish national transport context the weekend commuter services have received considerable attention. Criticism of CIE's competing national rail service has centred on its price levels and restricted geographical coverage. CIE's Expressway road passenger services are popular, but tend to concentrate on the high density trunk routes. The weekend commuter services appear to fill a real market gap. Without them, the travellers involved would face the choice of either a rail or Expressway journey with a necessary modal interchange and the possibility, in the case of rail, of significantly extra distance to be travelled between station and home, some form of carpooling arrangement, hitch-hiling or simply not travelling.

Without the public Service Travel Club, it is doubtful that any bus company would be in a position to assemble the high bus load factors on trips to remote areas, that are essential for the low level of price sought by the commuters. Without the particular form of participation practised by PSTC and the bus company jointly, it is doubtful whether the spirit of co-operation and flexibility, necessary to allow itinerary coverage of a large rural hinterland, would exist.

There are definite indications of social benefit to the inhabitants of remote rural regions from the process. In a European context the process must raise interesting possibilities in the context of worker migration from rural to urban areas. At present, the weekend commuter services in Ireland are very much a private sector initiative. As discussed earlier their legality has been questioned, but their popularity is such that the Government has commenced a review of the legislation restricting road passenger operations (which dates from 1932).

NOTES

1. Based on estimates supplied by the private Association of Motor Bus Owners (PAMBO) Ireland, 1984.
2. This is close to Walker's definition of worker participation in Walker K.F. 1986. "Worker's Participation in Management, Bulletin of the International Institute for Labour Studies, No. 2.

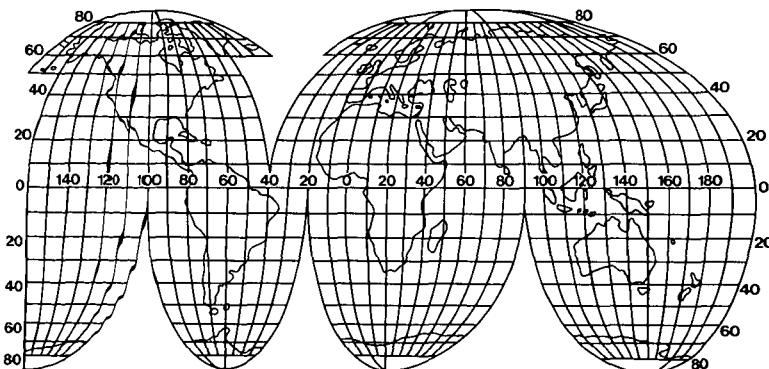
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