



# Navigating the Waters

## *of ITS Technologies*

*By: Doug Wood, Former Ride Program Director of Rhode Island Public Transit Authority*

Once upon a time only the most intrepid dared to travel. The world was largely unexplored and journeys unpredictable and dangerous. Fortunately, times have changed but for many transit dependent individuals travel can still be an adventure. And while public transit is considerably more dependable than sailing the high seas, it remains a challenge for many consumers, particularly those with special needs.

Those of us in the paratransit industry understand the challenges facing our consumers; safe, dependable transportation to jobs, medical appointments, senior services, etc. We continually struggle to provide these services as cost-effectively as possible. With limited resources, we focus on providing a consistent, reliable travel experience, i.e. quality customer service that is affordable for both consumers and sponsor agencies. It is a difficult balancing act, but remains the principle challenge of our industry.

There are now a variety of technologies, Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS), aimed at the specialized and public transit industries that address this challenge. The issue for many agencies is how to select the tools that work best for their particular service, customers and budget. The choices can be overwhelming, somewhat like sailing into uncharted territory.

Several years ago, the Ride Program in Rhode Island realized that growing service demand plus limited agency budgets required significant changes to the way we operated our coordinated statewide service. We were aware of the industry technologies but didn't know what would best fit funding agencies, Ride staff, service providers and ultimately our consumers. With an understanding of our general requirements, we launched an expedition to explore the technology options available to us. We did this prior to issuing an RFP, spending considerable research time visiting and reviewing other paratransit operations with more advanced system tools.

We focused on several important areas while conducting our search knowing any change involving people, processes and technology is a challenge. Looking back, considering a few significant questions at the outset made a big difference to our outcome, staff acceptance, implementation, and sustainability.

### **A number of navigational markers guided our ITS technology selection as we embarked on our adventure:**

- 1. How would staff handle the technology?** – Like many transit services, Ride had a wide range of staff and provider experience with computers and software programs. Some staff, such as dispatchers, had very little computer experience. Administrative staff had worked with a single program for many years so any process change would be a challenge. With this in mind, we examined programs to see how various screens appeared and how and what information was displayed. We questioned other software users about ease of use. We knew training would be an important requirement but also didn't want to re-invent the wheel.

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- 2. Could it support our complex service?** – We absolutely didn't want a cookie-cutter solution knowing the many unique features of our system. For example, as a coordinated service we have multiple sponsor agencies, different provider rates, complex billing rules, and strict reporting requirements. We needed a system that could be easily customized and adapted to how we did things - not the other way around.
  - 3. Would it work with other software?** – Similarly, we required easy access to data and information for our own reports. The ability to produce custom reports ourselves as needed rather than having to request, wait and then pay for every new report was important. Also the capability to coordinate with other software programs or add on new technologies when necessary in the future was key.
  - 4. Were there multiple product options available?** – We were looking to improve all aspects of our operation including passenger notification, driver performance, scheduling efficiency, dispatching response, no-show reductions, "where is my ride" issues, call center information, etc. This would be a major, long-term investment and we were open to a wide-range of innovative solutions for both the present and foreseeable future.
  - 5. How comprehensive was the company's background?** This may be an obvious item, but we wanted a company that had a track record with a variety of community transportation models including ADA, senior and Medicaid services. Every transit system has specific features with different requirements and expectations. We required a firm with a demonstrated partnership approach, offering creative solutions within our existing service framework.
  - 6. What is their reputation for support?** – Quick, reliable, effective system support was a critical requirement. Ride provides nearly 3,000 daily trips and could not afford to have serious system issues interfere with service. Having experienced poor software support in the past, we spent considerable time checking company references and calling other clients. In addition, support for future development was equally important. We wanted to know if the firm remained actively engaged once the sale and implementation phase was complete.
  - 7. Is there a commitment to product development?** – We all know technology changes quickly. It was important to have a company with a record of growth and commitment to change and innovation. As budgets tighten so does the pressure to provide more efficient and effective transportation options. Expanding service with limited resources while meeting customer and agency expectations for safe, affordable service is no easy task. We wanted a technology partner that understood both our service and funding challenges while developing software and hardware solutions for future services.
  - 8. Could we afford it?** – Like every agency with a limited budget we were interested in the best possible return for our money. Comprehensive, long-term solutions to address our scheduling, dispatching and customer service areas without additional fees or unexpected costs. On behalf of our funding sponsors, we required long-term value for our investment, not simply the least expensive quick fix. As a result, we carefully evaluated not only the initial proposal costs but support costs over the term of the contract.

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Like the early explorers, our voyage began with a general idea of where we needed to go. Starting with our own significant experience, we actively sought advice from those who had gone before us. We moved cautiously with a critical eye combined with an understanding of our own resources and capabilities. And as with all good travelers, we knew the journey would be as important as the destination.

### **Interested in Learning More?**

[Click here](#) to read a paper presented at a American Public Transportation Association (APTA) Annual Conference about how technology can be applied.

### **About the Author**

Doug Wood is the former Manager of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority's Ride Program. Ride is Rhode Island's statewide specialized transportation program which coordinates service for senior, disabled and low-income transit-dependent individuals. In recognition of their coordination success, The American Public Transit Association presented RIPTA and Ride with their **Outstanding Achievement Award** in 1999.

Doug began his career in public transportation as a RIPTA bus driver, later working as a Dispatcher, Scheduler, Service Analyst and RIPTA's ADA Coordinator. He was RIPTA's representative in the collaborative effort with state human service agencies to establish the statewide Ride program.

In 1994 Doug left RIPTA to work for the private management firm that managed Ride and similar transit projects. He rejoined RIPTA as the Ride Program Manager In 2003, retiring in March 2013. The Ride program has grown from several hundred trips a day to over 650,000 trips a year with an annual budget exceeding \$17 million.