Workplace Culture

Promotions. How are we doing?

by Pieter Wykoff, Central Office

Your take on how fair the system of promotions is at ODOT probably depends upon how many years you’ve been employed by the department. Even Director Jerry Wray admits that.

“Going back to the ’80s, ’70s, ’60s it was a closed system. It was all about friends, families, and the political system. People became very cynical about it,” he says. “When I first came here in 1991 I actually joked about it being the friends and family plan, but it was not funny. It was a de facto closed system that worked against certain groups, particularly minorities.”

He says that even though steps were taken to change the system back then, the “friends and family plan” means that even today the department is not as diverse as it should be. However, he says ODOT is determined to fix that.

“In the old days, people were hired and promoted based on things other than qualifications. We began changing that in the ’90s, but we’re not where we need to be,” he says.

ODOT Quality of Work Life (QWL) surveys from 1992, 1994, and 1996 surveys, more than 50 percent of the ODOT workforce disagreed with the statement, “Supervisors promote based on qualifications; not favoritism.”

The responses have changed. In the 2012 survey, only 13 percent disagreed with the statement “My supervisor has promoted employees based on a fair process and on qualifications, not favoritism.” In the 2013 QWL survey, the response to the statement “In the last year, my supervisor’s promoting of employees based on a fair process on and on qualifications, not favoritism,” had about 20 percent say it was worse or significantly worse. About 19 percent said it was better or significantly better, and the remainder agreed with the statement.

Assistant Director of Business and Human Resources Anne Fornshell says it is because ODOT has changed in the past two decades. She worked for the department in the mid-90s in human resources, then left to work at the Ohio Turnpike. She returned to ODOT in the past year.

“When I started, there was no real focus on the goals of the organization because there were no actual goals. During that time we formulated our first real strategic plan. We began doing the Quality of Work Life surveys. We attempted to change the nature and the culture of the department. We made it much more of an employee-driven agency,” she says.

She also says that promotions today are based upon structured job analyses, structured interviews, skills assessments and processes.
CLEanUpCleveland

Joel Hunt, Central Office

CLEanUpCleveland is an exciting, vibrant destination for visitors and a source of pride for those who live there. With 1,300 miles of highway, 12 miles of shorefront, 166 parks, and 36 neighborhoods, Cleveland has a lot to offer. Unfortunately, like all cities, litter mars the landscape. On June 4, volunteers from across the city will pick up litter along the highways, in parks, in neighborhoods and on beaches as part of a new event called CLEanUpCleveland!

“All eyes will be on Cleveland in July as the city plays host to the Republican National Convention—one of the largest meetings in the United States,” said ODOT Director Jerry Wray. “Thousands of journalists and visitors will descend on the city and we want to make a good first impression.

CLEanUpCleveland is a joint effort by ODOT, Keep Cleveland Beautiful, Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, the City of Cleveland, the Alliance for the Great Lakes, and Keep Ohio Beautiful.

“Litter costs taxpayers millions of dollars each year to clean up,” said Director Wray. “But thanks to volunteer groups like Keep Ohio Beautiful, its affiliates and volunteers, the impact is lessened.”

In the Greater Cleveland area, ODOT and its partners collected more than 42,000 bags of litter from roadways last year.

In Solemn Remembrance

by Joel Hunt, Central Office

More than 200 people from across Ohio and as far away as Washington D.C., traveled to Perrysburg April 12. They attended the 2016 National Work Zone Awareness Week kickoff, and paid tribute to highway workers who lost their lives in roadway construction zones.

Above Both solemn and stirring, the Ohio State Highway Patrol’s Color Guard presented state flags to three families who lost loved ones in senseless work zone crashes.

Above Director Jerry Wray and representatives from both federal and local organizations spoke about the importance of safety in the nation’s road and highway work zones.

Above A 400-foot mock work-zone allowed attendees to see what life is like behind the barrel.

Right “The National Work Zone Memorial - Respect and Remembrance: Reflections of Life on the Road” will serve as a tribute to Ohio Turnpike's John Fletcher, District 6’s Lee Rizor, Area Wide Protective’s Amber Rooks and District 5’s Shawn Blubaugh, now added to its honor roll.
Service comes first
By Pieter Wykoff, Central Office

SONJA SIMPSON WAS RECENTLY NAMED ODOT District 5 deputy director. She had been the ODOT deputy director of Operations in Central Office for the past five years. We asked her to share some thoughts about her career at ODOT.

ON HER EXPERIENCE PREPARING HER FOR THIS NEW JOB
I think because I’ve worked at different levels in government—village, small city, large city, metropolitan planning agency—I understand how all those entities are tied together for one greater good in our infrastructure network. I understand what the needs are for all of them. If we make changes at ODOT, I know how it will affect them.

ON WHAT SHE LEARNED AT CENTRAL OFFICE
In my role at Central Office I had to look at things from the 100,000-foot level. I was always trying to see how the bottom line for ODOT would be affected. How could we put out a process or a program that would be of assistance to all of the districts.

With knowledge of what Central Office does, sitting on this side, I understand the budget and the resources involved. Sitting on this side, I understand why Central Office makes some of the decisions they do. I know they’re trying to manage and they’re trying to be consistent.

ON PURSUING A DOCTORATE IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION AND BEING THE FOURTH WOMAN TO BE A DDD
I’m hoping to bring the practical and the academic together in the real world—to bring us up to a whole new level. As far as being only the fourth woman, it’s sad that we can still count that in this day and age. However, it says a lot to this administration that they’re looking at people who are not fitting the ‘normal’ mold when it comes to these positions. They’re looking at leadership skills, they’re looking at experience, and they’re looking at what people bring to the table.

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VER THE 20-PLUS YEARS
District 1 has performed chip seals, thousands of dollars in resurfacing has been saved, with pavement conditions consistently rated among the highest in the state.

“Our research indicates we perform this function at 20 percent less than contractors,” said Kirk Slusher, District 1 deputy director, “and we perform it better because we have continued to improve our process and equipment. On average, we chip seal 160 to 200 lane miles a year. We have become very efficient and effective with it.”

A chip seal involves placing a thin layer of liquid asphalt on the road surface, spreading a fine grade of stone over it and then rolling it in. The roadway is then swept to remove the majority of loose stone and to minimize dust. The method seals surface cracks against moisture and extends pavement life by up to 10 years before resurfacing is required.

Traditionally not popular with the public, the meticulous manner in which District 1 chip seal is placed lessens the inconvenience. Very few complaints are heard: “Briefly, loose stone or dust can cause motorists trouble, so we’re diligent in sweeping the roadway,” said Rod Nuveman, highway management administrator for District 1.

For the first time in its history, the district performed the operation on a four-lane priority route and chip sealed 32 lane miles of eastbound U.S. 30 in Hancock County from Ohio 235 to U.S. 68 in 2015. A new fog seal product, a thin emulsion placed over the stone to lock it in, was tested on this section and has shown good results. The district will chip seal the westbound lanes of U.S. 30 this year.

Last year, the district assisted District 2 in chip sealing more than 30 lane miles, and will assist them again this year on chip seal projects and in training their operators.

PHOTO BY BRUCE HULL, CENTRAL OFFICE

PHOTO BY RHONDA PEES, DISTRICT 1

PHOTO BY BRUCE HULL, CENTRAL OFFICE

PHOTO BY RHONDA PEES, DISTRICT 1
LIKE A TYPICAL MALE, NATE Tessler of District 1 can’t resist calling attention to his mussels. Although, in this case, they are of the water-breathing variety. Tessler recently passed the state certification test to perform freshwater surveys of these creatures. He is one of only five certified individuals at ODOT.

Aquatic animals that feed by filtering bacteria, algae, and decaying plant matter from lakes and streams, mussels are important to a healthy environment. They’re also a food source for fish, birds, and many mammals, and even when dead, their shells become nesting sites for small fish and other aquatic creatures. They’re protected by both state and federal law, and are considered endangered or rare in Ohio.

Tessler, who’s been with ODOT for two years and serves as the district environmental coordinator, is ready and able to help protect them. His final certification coursework test was to correctly identify 80 percent of the 100 mussels placed in front of him. He passed with a score of 93 percent.

“If you happen to miss one that’s on the list of federally endangered species, you fail the whole thing,” he said. “I was very anxious. I was really worried I wasn’t going to pass it.”

A typical mussel survey begins around 400 feet downstream of the project area with a scan of the stream bottom using a special viewing tube. If any, even one, are found, a full survey must be conducted. Tessler oversees their relocation, typically to an upstream location already inhabited by other mussels. The survey and relocation is to the appropriate state and federal authorities for their sign-off.

“Until approval is given, no construction work in the stream can be done,” said Tessler.

Tessler says his survey skills are in demand in District 1 and other locations in the state. His certification means the department saves money from going to outside consultants for this service.