

Bay Area companies board the transit benefits bus

BY PIA CHATTERJEE

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Every weekday morning at 8.40 a.m., Nawaaz Ahmed, research engineer for Yahoo, leaves his Castro Street apartment and walks a few blocks to catch the Yahoo shuttle. For one hour, Ahmed reads or catches up on work in the Wi-Fi-equipped bus until he reaches his workplace in Santa Clara.

Every evening, Ahmed undertakes the reverse commute. Ahmed is part of a growing army of Bay Area residents who commute on employer-provided transit. He cites convenience, money savings and the absence of the stress of driving as his key reasons.

These reasons are echoed by Dan McCoy, associate director of corporate transportation at Genentech, on why the biotech giant provides employees with a whole gamut of transportation benefits. "We are very proactive about maintaining our employees' work-life balance. Providing commute benefits, a service that our employees can use twice a day, every day, is an impactful way of reducing the stress in our employees' lives. Our goal is to support our employees in the ways that they want to be supported, and the transportation program has been very successful. We have been able to provide Genentech employees with a higher-quality commute and reduce the stress and cost of driving alone," says McCoy.

Genentech has 20 Wi-Fi-enabled buses, labeled GenenBuses, that ferry employees from Vacaville, Fairfield, Vallejo, Castro Valley, Pleasanton and San Francisco to company sites on the Peninsula. The buses collectively run 60 round trips per day on 12 regular routes.

According to McCoy, the idea is to ease long and costly commutes. Genentech also provides bus shuttles from Caltrain and BART stops and shuttles between buildings on Genentech's South San Francisco campus. Collectively, McCoy said, the buses serve around 4,600 employees per day, including 2,600 riders on the GenenBuses. The number of Genentech employees who drive alone to work has fallen by 7 percent in the past three years. About 30 percent of the



Employers have gotten more interested in commute programs, says 511.org's Maus.

Genentech workforce uses an alternative commuting by car.

Cross-pollinating across the aisle

Providing these transportation benefits to employees has helped Genentech as well. "We are definitely seeing employee recruitment and retention benefits," said McCoy. "For employees living in the far East Bay, living in an affordable area and taking the GenenBus to work is a very attractive proposition, and influences the decision to accept jobs at Genentech."

And that's not the only benefit, he noted. "These commutes are opportunities to make friends within the company and cross-pollinate ideas during the bus ride," he said. "These benefits are impossible to quantify, but we hear that very good information has been shared just by having an impromptu conversation on a shuttle."

In December 2000, Santa Clara County approved Stanford University's long-range development plan but told the university its growth must cause no new commute trips. In an effort to keep to its promise, the university offers an array of transportation alternatives that seek to limit the number of vehicle trips to the campus. One of these is the free Marguerite Shuttle service, a fleet of 34 biodiesel-

powered buses on 12 routes that connect the campus to the community, the Palo Alto transit center, the Caltrain station, Samtrans and VTA stops.

This service is available free to anyone who commutes to the campus. Stanford also gives eligible employees passes to ride Caltrain for free. As a result, Stanford has seen Caltrain ridership among its employees rise by 14 percent in five years. In the past five years, Brodie Hamilton, director of parking and transport at Stanford, has seen the number of Stanford employees who drive alone to work drop by 20 percent.

The university also provides emergency car services. "We are trying to resolve all the issues that get in the way of our employees using alternative transport services. So if they have gotten onto campus by using an alternative service, and need to get home in a rush, we'll give them a taxi ride or a rental car for free. For employees who need run errands, we have rental car options on campus," said Hamilton.

Hamilton said that Stanford runs a commute club with 6,700 members. Those who turn in their Stanford parking permit and promise to not to drive alone to campus get \$234 per year over and above any other transport benefits.

Stanford spends about \$2 million

a year on various transportation programs. That's in addition to about \$4 million Stanford spends on its Marguerite shuttle system. In return, Hamilton said, "We are greatly reducing costs related to construction of parking lots and minimizing the use of land need for parking."

\$4 to leave the car at home

Marin County started a pilot program in September 2007 to cut both traffic congestion and vehicle emissions. Through its Green Commuting program, Marin gives employees a stipend of \$4 a day to get to work without a car, said Craig Tackaberry, assistant director of the county public works department. About 19 percent of county employees have registered to participate in the program — a number that is climbing as summer advances and more employees are eager to walk or bike to work.

In the last quarter, Marin spent \$51,000 on this program and has cut 2.8 tons of carbon emissions per commute day. Tackaberry conceded that much can be done to persuade workers of the benefits of not driving alone. "How do you explain to people that if you bike or walk to work, you get you save money, save the time you would in getting a workout at the gym and save the annoyance of driving?"

He muses that rising gas prices may do his convincing for him this summer.

That sentiment is echoed by Debbie Maus, project manager of 511.org's ride-share program, a free service that helps employers identify and implement company transportation programs.

In the past year, Maus has seen a 40 percent jump in employers that provide at least one form of transportation benefits — vanpooling to tax benefits. In addition to Genentech, employers that provide employee transportation include Google, Oracle, Intel, Applied Biosystems and others.

"Over the past year, we have seen a rise in employer interest in employee commute programs in response to general trends in interest for greener business practices," said Maus. "Certainly the impacts of rising gas prices have accelerated that interest."

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Insurers gird for more liability claims as economy softens

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As the economy turns uncertain, professional liability insurers are concerned that claims could rise, and some — but not all — data suggest they already are.

At Redwood City-based Camico Mutual Insurance Co., which provides professional liability coverage, pre-claim notifications — which companies can file when they believe a claim may be imminent — have jumped 8 percent to 10 percent since 2007, said Suzanne Holl, vice president for loss prevention services.

"Clients try to tag onto the CPA ... as they are walking away from their home," Holl said.

Said Russ Roeca, a partner with Roeca, Hass, Hager LLP in San Francisco: "We always say it in the context of real estate: 'When deals get skinny, the claims come.' When people are making money and deals are fat, people overlook some of those smaller transgressions."

The best response, risk managers say, is "good manners" — essentially, diligent and personable communication — with clients. Put another way, the idea is to become more friendly with your clients, Holl said. Ask about week-

end plans, vacation travel, Junior's band practice.

And don't take on clients who seem likely to create problems.

"We encourage all firms that are partner-owners to have a regular talk about clients they want to maintain and take on, to make sure they have and implement a screening process," Holl said.

The strategy now, adds Camico spokesman Curtiss Olsen, is to battle "bad manners" or flawed communication with through vehicles like newsletters, courtesy reminders, follow-up letters. Camico is the nation's largest CPA-owned mutual insurance company and the second-largest provider of professional liability insurance to CPAs.

"People in brain businesses went into these fields because they like to think," Olsen said. "The good ones have good bedside manners, and the others ignore you. Try to get to know the client."

It's also a good idea to make sure that important communications happen in writing.

"(Any) type of advisory you want in writing, an email, some sort of written documentation," Holl said. "Be very

clear what you are trying to get across."

Some data do suggest litigation is dropping, but the severity of claims — the amount of money being demanded — may be rising, which is the key issue for many.

The medical profession understands that clear, empathetic communication can help reduce claim severity — it's part of a good bedside manner. But success has still been mixed.

"Doctors have become better at explaining the risks of surgery before a patient signs an informed consent," said Jack Meyer, senior vice president of business development for the Napa-based Doctors Co. "Doctors are better educated in how to be consistent in patient safety procedures."

Meyer said 2002-2007 data show a 34 percent decline in claims frequency. But the severity spiked 5.75 percent annually statewide. Nationwide, severity of claims jumped about 10 percent, said Meyer. California's tort reform, which caps non-economic pain and suffering awards at \$250,000 accounts for the difference, he said.

"It's a more fair standard, but the trend now is plaintiffs framing non-economic damages as economic damage," Meyer said.

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