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A great start: Connecting transit agencies and transportation network companies

On-demand rides are enhancing the public's access to transit. But, there's a bigger opportunity: to revolutionize the travel experience.

Transit providers across the nation are becoming more proactive and creative in harnessing the power of transportation network companies such as Uber and Lyft. Initial skepticism around these upstarts in the public transportation market is giving way to a critical examination of how transit agencies can leverage the momentum created by these companies to enhance service in their communities.

At a basic level, transportation network companies provide an on-demand first-mile/last-mile connection between people's homes or businesses and the transit options in their communities. Although taxis have provided similar services in urban areas, companies like Uber and Lyft are spawning an ever-larger swarm of on-demand vehicles that provide readily available and affordable rides in both cities and suburbs. This new reality has the potential to make transit options more attractive to commuters as they begin to ask: *Do I really want to drive to work? and Is it smarter to just Lyft over to the bus or train?* The next logical question for many people will be: *Do I really need a second – or even a first – car anymore?*

Transit agencies have an historic opportunity to reframe their roles: from managers of facilities and routes, to orchestrators of complete trips that involve an array of public and private entities. They are seeing greater encouragement from Washington, such as the Federal Transit Administration's Mobility on Demand Sandbox Program, which has funded select transit agencies who

are experimenting with ways to leverage new mobility tools to enhance service. They also are gaining greater cooperation from transportation network companies to integrate data and technology. For example, rideshare travelers heading to transit stations might get a pop-up window in their apps that provide real-time departure information.

These partnerships and initiatives are moving us in a positive direction. The combination of technology and entrepreneurial zeal will quickly get our existing systems and assets integrated, bringing significant value to the traveling public. Still, we have a much richer opportunity in the coming years to revolutionize how people travel in the U.S. It will require us to question several deeply entrenched assumptions about the experience our transportation system is capable of delivering.

Here are three areas that deserve our focus and exploration:

- **Eliminating uncertainty**

What's worse than missing the train or bus? The consequences of being late to work, a sports game, a medical appointment or another obligation may vary in severity, but nonetheless all create anxiety. With real-time data and integrated information systems, people will synchronize their trips across modes, make changes on the fly, and do it all with less anxiety than ever before. New GPS chips in smartphones will soon provide transportation network company drivers with exact

locations (within 1 foot) of their passengers, allowing for more crisp pickups and drop-offs, even in chaotic transit locations. We have the potential to *eliminate* the uncertainty that has plagued transit riders since the days of the stagecoach.

- **Elevating experience**

Interesting fact: A voyage from New York to England on the *RMS Queen Mary 2* takes seven days and costs \$2,000 – the same trip via plane takes seven *hours* and costs \$500. Yet passengers travel by sea by the thousands. This makes little sense until we consider that some passengers are seeking *experience* when choosing transportation options, beyond convenience and mobility. When it comes to public transportation, we now have the opportunity to advance beyond mere point-to-point efficiency to create experiences that will delight the traveler and satisfy preferences. Public buses and trains today are designed for durability. On-demand and rideshare cars have some ad hoc amenities, but are otherwise bare bones. What would make people *want* to use these travel options, to *prefer them* over driving? What if your 15-minute ride to the transit stop took place in a well-appointed van, with a cellphone charger, laptop tray and complimentary coffee? Or a mobile lounge? What if the train or bus had similar amenities, plus a mini-spa and gourmet meals? What seems far-fetched today may be *expected* by commuters tomorrow.

- **Embracing automation**

We are stepping into an era in which autonomous vehicles (AVs) will soon be taken for granted, as part of everyday life. As of October 2017, twenty-one states had passed legislation – and the governors of another five had issued executive orders – related to AVs, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Many U.S. cities are piloting, or gearing up to pilot, AVs. Our transit strategies must anticipate the day when self-driving cars, vans, pods or minibuses will orbit stations in synchronized fashion, picking up and delivering passengers.

Transit agencies are in a unique position to lead this kind of innovation. By working with federal and state partners, other stakeholders, and aggressively aligning their efforts with those of the transportation network companies, they can be at the forefront of repositioning travel as an experience rather than a dead zone of lost productivity and harried uncertainty. The traveling public will welcome the change – and reward transit systems with their loyalty and support.

About the Author

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