

THE VOLPE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS CENTER

AN INTRODUCTION



The Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (Volpe Center) has a long and proud history of defining problems and developing solutions. For more than 25 years, the Center has been applying its unique technical knowledge in planning, research, development, assessment, and technology integration and deployment to enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of organizations having critical transportation responsibilities.

Over the years, the work done by Volpe Center staff has made significant contributions to the improvement of our national transportation system, and has enabled the Center's clients to meet the rapidly evolving requirements of our increasingly mobile society. More important, in an era in which public debate has intensified over government spending and the value of federal investments in science and technology, the Volpe Center is a model of how government can reinvent itself to creatively meet and anticipate the needs of the citizenry.

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A BRIEF HISTORY

The Volpe Center has its earliest roots in our country's manned spacecraft program. Founded in 1965, the Electronics Research Center, an extension of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), was established in Cambridge, Massachusetts to take advantage of the strong academic resources available in the greater Boston area. Despite a record of accomplishments, by early 1970 the future of the Electronics Research Center was threatened by NASA budget cuts.

However, then-Secretary of Transportation (and former Massachusetts Governor) John A. Volpe envisioned that the Center could help the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) employ modern technologies to meet the nation's transportation needs in the last decades of the twentieth century. After securing the President's support, Volpe convinced Congress to move the activities and, on July 1, 1970, the Department's Transportation Systems Center was born. On its twentieth anniversary in 1990, the Center was renamed in Volpe's honor to recognize his contribution to the application of technology and knowledge to the problems of the nation's transportation system.

Congressional approval of Secretary Volpe's move came with one important caveat: the newly formed Center would be a "budget neutral" operation and would fund its existence entirely from payments received for the services it provided. A revolutionary approach at the time, the funding model for the Center was an admirably prescient view of "reinventing government" more than 25 years before its current importance.

Since then, the Volpe Center has become a world-class resource for the transportation community without a single direct Congressional appropriation. Initially, staff members at the Center were involved in hundreds of projects in support of various modal administrations within the DOT. Beginning in 1985, the Center significantly expanded its scope of operations through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Defense (DoD) authorizing Center personnel to work on DoD projects. More recently, the Volpe Center has conducted research in a variety of areas for numerous other federal agencies. Fully one-third of Volpe Center work now comes from organizations outside the Department of Transportation, including some state and local entities.

Today, the Center operates on an annual budget approaching \$200 million, a significant increase from its original funding in 1970 of just \$17 million. Further, the Volpe Center has more than 550 full-time employees and 1,000 private-sector contractors who work on more than 300 major client projects. Clearly, given its funding approach, such an organization would not be possible without widespread customer support.

AN ENTREPRENEURIAL MODEL

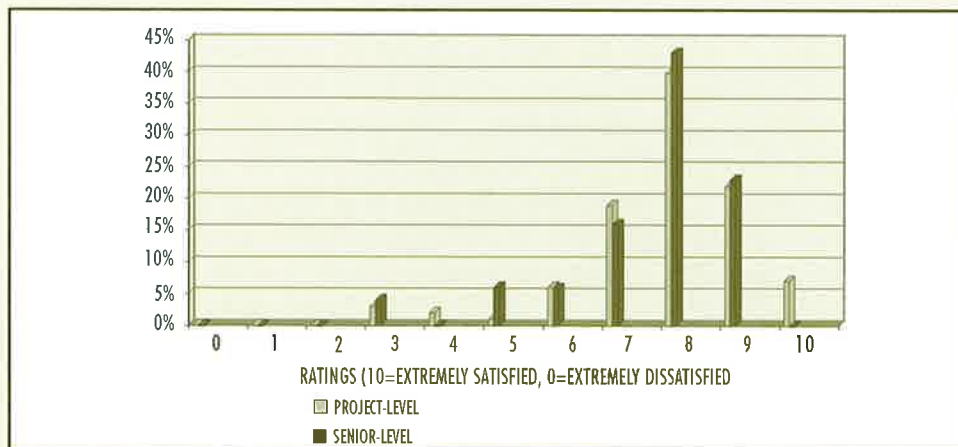
The funding model under which the Volpe Center operates has contributed immensely to its entrepreneurial approach to problem solving. Because the Center relies on funds it receives for client work, it must be responsive to the demands of its marketplace just like any private company.

Accordingly, in 1995 the Center launched its Customer Satisfaction Monitoring Initiative to gauge its customers' perceptions of the level of services they receive. The Volpe Center conducted more than 200 peer interviews with all active clients from DOT and other federal agencies.

The first round of this initiative indicated broad satisfaction with the services received by Volpe Center clients. More than two-thirds of interview respondents declared a high degree of satisfaction with the services they received, and more than 25 percent of responding clients rated Volpe Center services at either a 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10 (see chart below).

In true entrepreneurial fashion, the Center focused on how services could be improved. In many instances, remedial action was taken locally by project staff; broader cross-cutting issues were addressed corporately. For example, to help customers better understand how to do business with the Volpe Center, they have published a "How to Start Work" brochure and have streamlined their work initiation process.

A second round of customer satisfaction monitoring is planned for 1997. The Center is committed to improving its working relationships and products. Current and future clients can be assured that the Volpe Center will continue to seek feedback and strive to achieve the highest levels of client satisfaction.



More than two-thirds of all current clients rate work done by the Volpe Center in the 8-10 range (with 10 representing "extremely satisfied").

THE VOLPE CENTER'S ROLE IN OUR CHANGING WORLD

Today, technology can be both a blessing and a curse in helping us to cope with the complexities of modern life. When properly applied, technology can provide us with new insights into issues and help us to be more responsive to our rapidly changing world.

The primary role of the Volpe Center has been and continues to be one of assisting the transportation community in the proper application of technology to meet today's transportation demands. Indeed, most of the projects you will read about in this and future issues of the *Volpe Transportation Journal* focus on the creative application of existing technologies to help solve the problems of our increasingly mobile society.

But perhaps even more important than providing technology-based solutions to these problems is the Volpe Center's role as an agent for change. "The role played by the Center has become one of problem definition and problem solving," says Dr. Richard R. John, Director of the Volpe Center. "The Center often acts as an agent of change, fostering innovation at all stages of an interactive process, then links the generation of advanced technology and practices with its final deployment and use."

Far more than a mere conduit for technology, the Volpe Center is playing an increasingly important role as a catalyst for change. Volpe Center staff members don't just work on projects. Their involvement helps to energize the process of problem solving within client organizations, often providing the tools necessary for clients to carry out their own innovation. As the federal government works to become more entrepreneurial, the Volpe Center brings its unique heritage and its own entrepreneurial vision to bear on how government will work in the twenty-first century.