

win apta transit system of the year

PROFILE OF ANDY BYFORD,

Chief Executive Officer at the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC)*

Interview location: TTC Headquarters in Toronto, Ontario and on the subway.

In two words, he describes himself as “British Patriot.”

By Laura Lee Huttenbach



Andy Byford, in his office at the TTC headquarters in Toronto, with a framed Plymouth Argyle, his beloved football team's, jersey. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach, August 2017.)

Andy Byford is standing at his computer when he lets me into his office, four minutes after our scheduled meeting. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting,” he says. “I’m usually very punctual, but I just needed to finish a draft of this email. Here,” he continues, pointing to the monitor, “let me show you.” An accent, as well as the framed green Plymouth Argyle soccer jersey hanging on the wall, gives away his British upbringing. He is talking quickly, with an excited energy, as if he’s making up for running behind. Andy is the Chief Executive Officer of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), and the email is to the TTC Board about his Executive Team. He directs my attention to one line in particular, which reads, “Our Executive composition is at seven males, six females.” He is smiling broadly. “Five years ago,” he explains, “there wasn’t one woman on the Executive team.” >

thick skin and endless optimism

The goal, he says, is for the composition of his organization to reflect the makeup of society. He says he doesn't use quotas, and makes appointments based on merit. But if there are two candidates with the exact same credentials and the only difference is that one person comes from an underrepresented demographic, he will hire that person, and he will continue that practice until he achieves his goal of making the TTC look like the city it serves. "Sorry, we can sit down now," he says, directing me to the couch as he takes a seat in a leather chair. He is a little shy of six feet, but his thin, runner's frame makes him look taller. Seven floors below us, subway cars are pulling in and out of the Davisville subway station, and the window looks out onto the rail yard.

Andy is a frequently featured figure in Toronto media, and before meeting him I'd read several articles. In April 2014, for example, the *Star*—Canada's most circulated daily newspaper—published a 10,000-word profile about Andy, entitled, "Can This Man Save the TTC?"



Andy, riding the TTC subway. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach, August 2017.)

Last June, when the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) named TTC the Transit System of the Year, the answer seemed to be yes. "Did you see the board downstairs?" asks Andy. In the lobby, next to the security desk, an easel displays a three-foot poster with the designation written in red letters. I am curious to know the arc of his experience at TTC. "Oh, I could write a book today about my time at TTC," he says, leaning forward. "Ask me anything you want."

In July 2011, Andy was forty-five, living in Sydney, Australia, and working as RailCorp's COO when he accepted an interview at TTC (his wife, Ali, hails from Ottawa). On the day he was supposed to interview—literally as he was on his way to the TTC office—a newspaper headline caught his eye: "[Toronto Mayor Rob]

Ford Plotting to Oust TTC Chief over Subway Extension: Gary Webster's Refusal to Support the Sheppard Subway Extension Has the Ford Administration Looking to Replace Him."

Andy's interview was with Gary Webster. "That was kind of awkward," says Andy. "It was the elephant in the room, but Gary, for whom I have enormous respect, tackled it head-on. He said, 'Don't worry about all that. It's just politics.'"

Having already worked in transit in London and Sydney for more than two decades, Andy was familiar with the delicate dance between constituencies. (He has identified six constituencies for a transit executive: employees, customers, politicians, the media, unions, and contractors.) Andy was also aware of the problems at TTC. "The subways were squalid," he says. Public washroom were disgusting.

*My learning curve
went through
the roof*

Trash littered the cars. Buses and streetcars were packed like sardine cans. On social media, riders were posting unflattering images of the subway's

front line workers, including a fare collector who'd fallen asleep in his booth.

He and Webster spoke candidly about the state of TTC. Where some people might have seen obstacles, Andy saw a huge opportunity. He'd been lucky to have good mentors like Mike Brown at the London Underground and Rob Mason at RailCorp—"icons who were able to effect complete turnarounds"—and Andy was ready to build his own legacy. In November 2011, Andy became TTC's new COO. A few months after he started the job, in February 2012, Gary Webster was fired after thirty-seven years of service. "It was a political coup," explains Andy. In a special meeting, executive board members voted, five to four, to dismiss Webster in light of his clashes with Ford.

On the day the dismissal was announced, a press pack gathered outside City Hall. Andy spoke after Webster. "I was pretty nervous," admits Andy. In his speech, he thanked Webster for his service and promised to provide stability and vision to the organization. "My learning curve went through the roof," he says. In April, he was officially named CEO. Immediately, he identified what he calls "quick wins" for the company. Quick wins were things like cleaning up the subway and creating a customer charter.

From the glass table in front of us, Andy picks up a red booklet—a copy of TTC's five-year corporate plan, published in

*We had to act,
look, and think
differently.*

2013—and passes it to me, adding the copy was mine to take home. “That was a main thing for me,” he says. “Before that, we didn’t have a corporate plan.” In it, he outlines five “mega projects.” Mega projects included a new streetcar fleet, a smart card to replace tokens, installation of Automatic Train Control (a safety mechanism), an 8.6-kilometer extension to Line One with six new stations, and—“this is my signature policy,” he says—improvements to the work environment at TTC. “To have enduring success, we had to tackle the culture,” he explains. “We had to act, look, and think differently.”

Good leadership requires not only the ability to set clear goals, but also the ability to communicate them to stakeholders. In the beginning of 2013, Andy attended eighty-two (out of eighty-three) employee town hall meetings, held at all times of day. He wanted to address the people doing every job, from a shift-working janitor to upper-level management. “It would be eleven at night, and my wife would be saying, ‘Where are you going?’ Another town hall.” At the meetings, he

would play a video outlining the corporate plan. He knew his audience: many TTC employees had been there for decades, and some were second- or third-generation transit workers. He wanted to tap into their inherent pride, so he would open by saying, “Are you as sick as I am with some of the media we get and how we’re slagged off every day in the *Star* and *Sun*?” A lot of people nodded their heads. “I am, too,” he assured them. “And we’re going to do something about it.”

Most people were receptive to his ideas and ready for change, but invariably, he says, “There would be someone sitting in the back like this.” He assumes the universal *I-hear-you-but-I’m-not-listening* pose, leaning back in his chair, locking his fingers behind his neck, and propping one foot up on the coffee table.

When it came time to take questions, as Andy recalls, that person “would say, ‘Yeah, no disrespect, Mr. Byford, but we’ve heard it all before.’ And I’d say, ‘But have you? Have you heard this message from your CEO in your lunchroom at three a.m.? I don’t think you have. Look, I haven’t made my mind up about you, and I’d ask you to do the same about me. Give me a year. If in a year, it doesn’t feel different, you’re absolutely right.’”

Before we head downstairs to the subway, Andy puts on his navy suit jacket over his checkered button-down shirt. He moves his nametag, which had been pinned to his tie, to be displayed on his lapel, right underneath a TTC pin. He wants people to know who he is, in case they have a question or a suggestion for improving the system.



Andy, in front of one of the new TTC streetcar fleet. (Photo credit Laura Lee Huttenbach, August 2017.)

In the Davisville station, he points to a subway map. In the bottom corner, there is a picture of the station manager with an office number. Andy wants customers to have a face and a point of contact if there are concerns, or praise, for the station. “This used to be covered in handwritten signs, and it looked terrible,” he says, walking to the collector booth. “Now we have professional, printed signs.” He greets the fare collector by name, sticking his fingers underneath the window for as much of a handshake as the opening will allow. “Hi Andy,” the fare collector says. Andy asks the man how his day is going, but there’s no news to report. Andy notices an abandoned paper coffee cup sitting on the counter, and he scoops it up. On his way to the trashcan, he snatches a paper

receipt and a brochure from the ground. “I’ve only regretted picking up litter once in my life,” he says, as we proceed through the turnstile. “There was what looked like a plastic bag on a subway seat, but when I picked it up, it was warm and heavy.” The plastic bag was a used diaper. “I didn’t know what to do, because I couldn’t put it back,” he says, recalling his exasperation. “I mean, who leaves a diaper on the subway?”

The train arrives after two minutes on the platform, and it is crowded but not uncomfortable. When two seats open up, I ask Andy if he wants to sit down. “No, I never sit down,” he says. “Seats are for the customers. Plus with my luck, someone will snap a picture of me sitting

on a crowded subway car and post it on social media.” At our second stop—Summerhill—Andy says, “That’s my stop.” Often, because he lives so close to the office, he will walk to work. “People will see me walking and say, ‘Oh, is the subway not running?’” he says, laughing. Whether his commute is on foot or by another form of transit, he is definitely not driving a company car. In fact, he’s not driving anything, because he’s never had a driver’s license. “I failed the driving test twice,” he says. The first failure, by his reckoning, was merited, while he attributes the second failure to an instructor with an attitude. “I still remember how to parallel park, though,” he says.

He points to the emergency cord on the subway car. “That used to be labeled *Passenger Assistance*, and customers were pressing it all the time. They’d miss their stop or get confused, so they’d pull it and stop the train,” he says. When they changed the signage to *Emergency*, people stopped pulling the cord for non-emergency matters, and it was another step toward efficiency.

We get off at Union Station, and Andy pauses in front of the escalator that is under repair. “That’s the bane of my existence,” he says. A contractor installed it incorrectly and they’re just now getting it fixed. “It’s not our fault,” he says, “but it looks bad, and we’re getting the blame.” He greets the people at the TTC information desk and at the collector booth, and a janitor stops to say hello. Everyone calls him by his first name.

He likes—even insists on—being approachable. Back in 1989, when he worked for the London

Underground, the hierarchical, militaristic structure at the agency bothered him. As part of his graduate training, he was a station

***I’ll never forget
how that feels,
having been
a uniform-
wearing, shift-
working, front
line employee.***

foreman. He recalls going to the uniform store to get fitted for his uniform, which was made of a scratchy, synthetic material. The worker asked for his measurements in the waist, collar, and head. “Well, I had no idea about my hat size,” says Andy. “He threw a hat at me and said, ‘Try that.’” Andy thought the hat fit, but it was too small. “After every shift, I’d end up with a splitting headache and a big red line around my head.” He traces a circle around his forehead and scalp. “That’s probably why I lost my hair.” When he’d visit the head offices in uniform, he said the management who didn’t know he was a graduate trainee would treat him like garbage. “You knew your place,” he says. “It was very much, ‘Me, boss. You, minion.’ I’ll never forget how that feels, having been a uniform-wearing, shift-working, front line employee.” When he came to TTC, he



From his “Back to the Floor” days, where Andy would spend a day observing what his colleagues do and occasionally have a go at it himself. “Here, I’m in our Harvey Shop, tightening bolts (under supervision) on a streetcar motor,” says Andy. “Other days have included a whole shift in a booth with a Station Collector, out on patrol with our Special Constables (I got to wear a stab proof vest for that one!), a day on Wheel Trans (our para trans service) and various stints in the Customer Service Centre, answering customer tweets.” (Photo used with permission by Andy Byford.)

wanted a completely different vibe. Perhaps his humble leadership approach is imbued with the spirit of his grandfather, who drove a bus down the streets of London for forty years.

Andy wants to show me the new streetcar fleet, so we follow the signs to their stop, which has a line of about sixty people. On the way, he stops to talk to fare inspectors, and they say it's been an easy day. "That's a hard job," Andy observes as we keep walking. An older lady wearing a floral blouse, carrying a cane, stretches out her



Andy and his wife Ali in England with Plymouth Sound and their apartment in the background. No matter where he lives in the world, Plymouth will always be home. (Photo used with permission by Andy Byford.)

hand to touch Andy's shoulder. "I just want to say you're doing such a nice job," she says. "I'm so impressed with everything, and we are going to miss you."

"Where am I going?" Andy asks.

"Aren't you leaving us?" she says.

"No, no, that's a rumor," he says. "I'm not on contract. I'm a full-time employee. I'll be around!" The woman is relieved, and she thanks him for his good work. The streetcar arrives, and it is fancy and sparkling. "Aren't they

beautiful?" he says, pointing out the "APTA Transit System of the Year" decal on the front car. Another man walks up to him to complain that, during rush hour, the streetcars and buses are too crowded to pick up passengers waiting at a few stops. "You should run another bus that pretends to be out of service, and have it pick up passengers at later stops," the man suggests. Andy thanks him for the idea and gives him a business card. "We like hearing from our riders," he says.

It's getting to be late on a Friday afternoon, so we return to the office via subway. It's the beginning of a long weekend in Canada, and Andy is planning to spend it with Ali, sitting by the Ottawa River, reading, running, watching football, and drinking craft beer. On the escalator at the Davisville station, two teenagers are riding close to Andy. When we get to the top, one finally works up the courage to speak. "Excuse me, Mr. Byford?" he says. "I just wanted to say that my friend and I *love* the new streetcars. They are so cool."

Andy smiles and shakes their hands. "Thank you," he says. "I'm so glad you like them!"

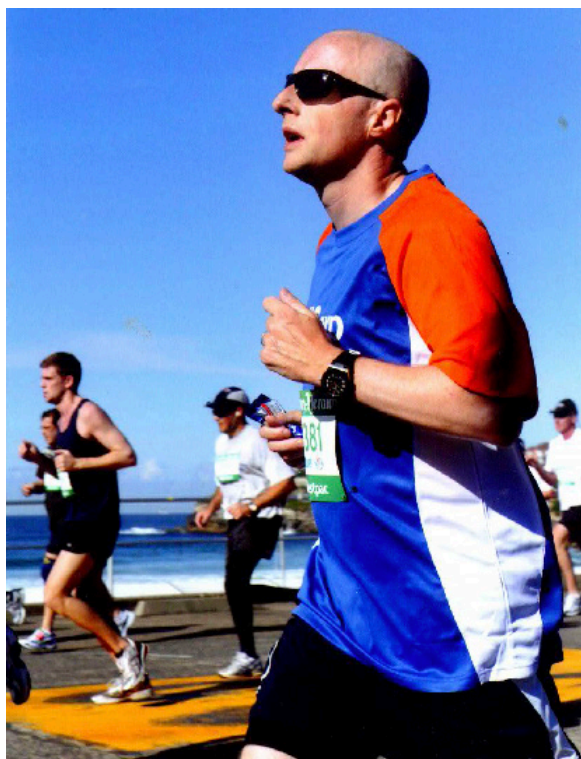
"Oh we do," the boy says, appearing star-struck.

"And my friend had a question, too."

The friend's question is regarding when a subway line will be getting new cars.

"That'll be a little while," says Andy, launching into an explanation of their plans. The boys are nodding their heads, mouths literally open, like they're listening to a celebrity. When he finishes the spiel, the boys are satisfied, even giddy. "When you get a bit older, I hope you'll come work for us at the TTC," says Andy.

"Oh I'd love that," says the boy who spoke first.



Andy, running the “City to Surf,” a 14 mile run from downtown to Bondi Beach, in sunny Sydney, Australia, where he lived and work from 2009 to 2011. (Photo used with permission by Andy Byford.)

Before leaving the station, Andy wants to point out one last thing. Extracting a copy of the free daily newspaper *Toronto 24 Hours* from a newspaper box, Andy tells me that he writes a column in it every Friday. “It used to be only bad news about the TTC—the outages, the delays, the accidents,” he says. “But we asked to have a page once a week where we could share progress updates as well.” Andy’s column for this week is titled, “Federal Money Helps Keep the TTC on Modernization Track.” Along the right side of the page is an employee profile. This month, it’s a business student named Austin Jones, who is interning for TTC’s Community Relations Department. “It’s an extremely exciting time to be at the TTC,” says Austin. “I’m proud to have a hand in moving our organization forward.”

At the beginning of 2016, Andy wrote a goal on the dry erase board in his office with blue marker: “Win APTA Transit System of the Year.” In the lobby, he made space in a glass case to display the award after they won it. The TTC, which has the third-largest ridership of any transit agency in North America—behind New York City and Mexico City—hadn’t won the award since 1986. The goal stayed on the board, un-checked, and the shelf remained empty for more than a year. Andy recalls that some people mocked his vision.

Last June, when he got the phone call with the news that TTC had won, he called his executives into his office without telling them why. He wore a stern expression, which led to speculation as to the purpose of the meeting. “Are you leaving us?” someone asked. When everyone had gathered in the room, he closed the door. “There’s no easy way to tell you this,” Andy began. Then he walked over to the dry erase board, picked up a green marker, and put big check mark over the goal he’d written eighteen months earlier. His team members were ecstatic. “It felt so good,” he recalls.



Andy Byford, in 1989, as a young station foreman at Regents Park Station on the Tube. (Photo used with permission by Andy Byford.)

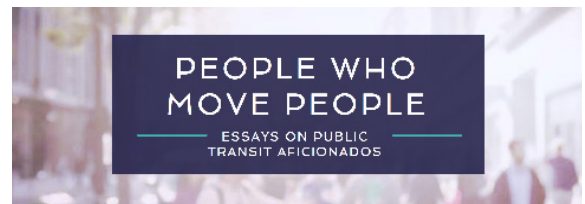
Not everyone in Toronto celebrated. As the colloquial wisdom goes, *Haters gonna hate*. Though Andy, at the behest of Ali, tries to avoid reading the comments sections of any article, some snarky reactions made their way to his attention. “Well, if I don’t stick up for the organization, who will?” he asks. He penned a “rather bullish email” to all TTC employees, asking them to ignore the skeptics and focus on their achievements. In the email, he explained that he evaluated success based on three filters. “First, are the customers happier now than when we started five years ago?” he says, counting with his thumb. “Second, are our team members happier? And number three, do our peers think we’re doing a good job?” Through customer surveys, measures of employee engagement, and now the APTA award, Andy could confidently assure his team that they were going in the right direction. “Ignore the scoffers,” wrote Andy. “We can hold our heads up.”

He concedes that people can be fickle by nature, and that no matter how much progress TTC has made, if a customer is late to work due to a transit glitch, he or she may resent the entire system. “You’re only as good as your last peak,” says Andy. “If your peak goes well, your customers are happy. If the peak doesn’t go well, the service sucks. To do this job, you need thick skin and endless optimism.”

**Note: This interview took place in early August 2017. In November, Andy Byford accepted a new position as president of New York City transit.*



Writer Laura Lee Huttenbach is the author of *“The Boy is Gone”* and *“Running with Raven”* (Kensington Press, May 2017). Her website is www.LLHuttenbach.com.



People Who Move People is a web series profiling individuals who have made an impact in public transit. The series has been initiated and funded by RouteMatch Software, an Atlanta-based company who is passionate about transit and proud to record these stories. Find out more at peoplewhomovepeople.