

Driver Safety, Retention Challenge Truckers

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When I think about driver safety, retention, recruiting and productivity, the actions of four groups come to mind: shippers, receivers, carriers and government. Each plays an integral part in developing efficient truckload capacity in America.

When carrier sales teams solicit freight, they try not to say or do anything that might be perceived as negative, for example, saying “no” to multiple stops, touching the freight and tarping. The idea is just to get the business and let the operating team figure it out.

Not all carrier operating teams can find the information drivers need for a safe delivery, such as the nature of the materials to transport, service sensitivities and what’s expected at the loading and receiving points. Rather than ensuring the driver clearly understands the program, some operations leaders are just happy to get new opportunities for their team. They reason that there’s no such thing as “bad freight.”

Bad driver experiences contribute to driver turnover and/or loss to the industry.

Obviously, not all shippers are angels either. Instead of asking awkward questions, company sales teams opt for the easy route and commit carriers’ drivers to providing whatever loading or delivery-related tasks the customer wants, safe or unsafe. If the customer says, “Everyone else provides this service — why can’t you?” some weak transportation leaders force their carriers to agree to perform loading, unloading, pumping and/or tarping tasks that may be physically challenging, dangerous, fatiguing and may occasionally lead to driver injury — especially in challenging weather.

Once again, the result can be loss of driver capacity.

Then, there are the receivers, which are either ignorant of the dangers associated with the unloading of certain materials or simply don’t care. The latter may turn a blind eye to the perils associated with untarping flatbed trailers without fall protection or requiring drivers to break down pallets and/or unsafely unload trailers and tankers.

Some devious receivers agree to do their own unloading but then tell the driver he’ll have to wait until the crew gets around to him. The driver begins unloading rather than endure an unprofitable delay.

Unfortunately, some receivers like to remind everyone they’re the customer and the driver’s choice is to “do what I say or haul the load back.”

Injury and loss of earnings do little to maintain driver interest and capacity.

Finally, there is the government. Sometimes government looks to the marketplace to solve its own problems, and sometimes it takes action regardless of what the trucking industry believes is the correct course of action.

With fatigue now said to cause vehicle accidents and driver injury, it astounds me that Congress still hasn’t involved the Occupational Safety and Health Administration or passed a law limiting certain types of

nondriving activities. Perhaps the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration’s charter needs to be changed to encompass this aspect of a driver’s job.

Unless shippers and carriers take this action, government also will begin to look seriously at these issues to improve driver well-being and public safety.

Driver turnover — and the challenge of making truck driving an attractive occupation — are costly to carriers and shippers alike and will have a progressively severe impact on the nation’s ability to have cost-effective and efficient operating capacity in the years to come unless we take action now, beginning with these five steps:

- Leaders and senior managers in the four categories — carriers, shippers, receivers and government — must step up to the plate and lead the effort. That’s what they are paid to do.

- FMCSA, the National Industrial Transportation League, American Trucking Associations and the Truckload Carriers Association should create a joint task force to evaluate driver fatigue and safety issues related to on-duty, nondriving activities related to handling the product, tarping, pumping, etc. They should create a safe operating model and a course of action that could include a joint request for a congressional initiative.

- With risk management in mind, carrier recruiting teams should clearly define expectations for their sales and operations teams and hold them accountable for securing business and information, allowing dispatchers and driver managers to plan effectively while giving drivers good experiences so as to improve retention and boost recruiting efforts.

- Supply chain teams should recognize the inherent dangers of demanding drivers to perform tasks beyond driving. Likewise, transportation teams should become strong advocates for driver well-being. Providing an attractive and safe workplace for drivers not only safeguards capacity, it builds competitive capacity for tomorrow’s marketplace.

- Finally, shippers should instruct carriers to provide accident information related to their shipments and, in conjunction with their safety team, educate marketing and sales teams and receivers; provide training and oversight to warehouse operations and hold them accountable for acting responsibly; and consider changing packaging to facilitate fast and mechanical unloading, including weatherproofing products in a way that eliminates tarps.

Safe handling, loading, unloading and storing of the product is best left to professional warehouse workers, while safe transport of the goods should be left to professional carriers and their drivers.

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