

SMALL STEPS TO RETAINING DRIVERS

The ongoing driver shortage is not news to anyone in the trucking industry. Along with falling rates, increasing equipment and operating costs, and uneven capacity, the concern of having enough qualified drivers to operate the nation's commercial motor vehicles is a matter of urgency. Over the years, there have been suggestions to change the legal environment — such as allowing under-21-year-olds to drive interstate — and suggestions on looking for new sources of drivers, such as returning military personnel. The current

thinking is a broad effort to make the industry more appealing generally, to millennials and women, who traditionally may not have thought about careers in the industry.

That women have not considered a career in trucking is disappointing, because women who are already in this industry are phenomenal leaders and excel in their jobs, whether as company presidents who build their market share; drivers who rack up millions of miles without incident or accident; or the multitude of technical, managerial, and operational functions that are performed flawlessly and allow their

companies to function smoothly, successfully, and competitively.

There's a great organization that exists to represent women at all levels of the trucking industry, and it is appropriately called the Women In Trucking Association. WIT exists to promote the employment of women in the industry; to minimize the obstacles that keep women from truly considering opportunities in the industry; and to promote their accomplishments and leadership. But WIT also heightens the awareness of how the industry can do better for its employees, regardless of gender.

It may not seem obvious, but we all have a role to play in WIT's goals because the association doesn't just speak to the issues facing women, but rather to the issues facing anyone who works in a team environment and relies upon a network of people to help with their success. As an example, WIT has commissioned and presented independent research that reveals how truck cabs can be redesigned to make them more usable, and less fatiguing, for individual drivers, some of whom happen to be women. Just as adjustable steering wheels are widely available in cars to better-suit drivers with longer or shorter arms and back heights, grab handles can be repositioned, and foot pedals can be made adjustable so that more drivers can be comfortable and safe when operating a truck. That helps not just women, but also men who have smaller or shorter body shapes than the common stereotype of a big, burly, broad-shouldered man.

And look at the positive response of the trucking industry's partners when a deficit is brought to their attention. Years ago when a driver's diet and healthy eating was the focus of attention, truck stops responded by reducing the amount of fried foods on their menus, by offering heart-healthy alternatives, and by identifying the calories and nutritional value of popular food items. Does that help only women? Of course not. Healthy eating is the concern of every individual. And truck stops are coming through in other ways that make the industry a more pleasant place to work. You may notice that c-stores at truck stops have started to enhance their product offerings in response to requests by women and ethnic groups. Showers are cleaner and now offer fluffier towels, responding to the observations of their women customers. And truck stop parking lots are getting brighter and more secure thanks to better lighting. That doesn't help just women, but helps all drivers, because all of us want to feel safe and be able to observe our surroundings as we walk to our truck in the back corner of the parking lot.

The focus of the industry seems to be on attracting drivers to solve the driver shortage, and the reach extends to women. That's a great start. But how do we ensure that drivers will stay after they have been recruited? Not just with money. We've all heard the line that if we just paid drivers more money, we wouldn't have a driver shortage. But we can't throw money at the problem and expect the problem to go away. We can keep drivers — women and men — by treating them the same way we ourselves would want to be treated: by being candid and honest before hire, and by then maintaining a positive and responsive working environment.

People need to be told honestly about what they can expect in their job. For drivers, it might be the amount of home time a driver can reasonably expect. For account representatives, it might be the amount of handholding that is expected compared to actual sales opportunities and resulting commissions. Risk managers might feel betrayed if they have been led to believe that your insurance company is a delight to work with, but it turns out that the insurer's account reps are difficult to work with, not responsive, and not supportive when a serious and time-critical problem presents itself.



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Companies that seem to have the fewest problems in retaining employees have a good understanding of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and try to apply the Act's concepts across the board in order to keep employees satisfied. The ADA generally provides for reasonable accommodations to be made by an employer when an employee's medical or physical condition is disabling and prevents his or her performing a job the way that most people can perform it. An accommodation is any change in the work environment, or in the way things are customarily done, that enables an individual with a disability to enjoy equal employment opportunities. An accommodation builds loyalty, trust, and gratification in an employee. What great attributes! Successful employers try to make reasonable accommodations where disability isn't an issue. If an employee wants to leave early to watch a child's baseball game, or come in late after shoveling the snow off a neighbor's sidewalk, why wouldn't an employer want to grant that type of request? If you or I made the request, we would want it to be accommodated. Successful employers try to grant those requests for an accommodation when they can because on balance, it is a generous but relatively minor thing to do. So if any driver — not just a woman driver — asks for a different route that will get him or her home earlier; or asks for any other reasonable change, many companies are inclined to work towards accommodating the request. Not because it is required, but because it can be done, because a valued employee asked, and because it may likely be reflected in loyalty and gratitude in return. This type of holistic philosophy should be encouraged if drivers are to be retained. The job is a tough one, the lifestyle is unforgiving, and there are not that many opportunities for an employer to show its appreciation, but agreeing to a small request is one way that an employer can be responsive, be accommodating, and avert turning a valued employee into a disgruntled employee.

A workplace has sometimes been likened to an extension of our homes, with complex relationships and unspoken rules. If the industry is to be successful in retaining employees — whether they be women or men, whether they be drivers or managers — it will be because it plays off the strengths of its individual employees. ■

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