

A New Approach to Driver Retention

By Gary Norton

Open any trucking magazine to the help wanted section, and you will find all kinds of ideas in regards to how companies keep their drivers happy. The slogans, 'our people are our main asset, respect for drivers, or the open door policy', etc., are mentioned in most of the advertisements. Every company wants to show that they care, and the good ones actually do. So how come it is so difficult to keep drivers? Is the long-haul trucking industry actually addressing the issues that keep older drivers happy and turnover rates low? Or are drivers burning out due to the rigours of long-haul trucking?

Although there are always slow times in any business. Many trucking companies seem to have more freight than they have drivers to move it. Most companies want their drivers to work as much as possible, which keeps the trucks making as much revenue as possible. Some companies offer their drivers 10 to 14 days out for 2 days off. While this is good for the company, it probably creates a high rate of driver burn-out and turnover.

There seem to be two types of drivers:

- One type wants or needs to make as much money as possible and will take as many runs as they can. This is the type of driver a company really wants.
- The other type of driver wants plenty of home time to enjoy life before getting too old to do the pleasurable things in life. This is the type of driver that companies have got to come to grips with.

Is there a significant percentage of truck drivers who would be willing to take home less money in order to have more home time to pursue their hobbies and other interests? The big question is how to reach a compromise where the companies are getting the most miles/profit from each truck and the drivers are getting enough home time to keep themselves happy. This lowers driver attrition rates and keeps valuable, veteran drivers in the truck, instead of looking for greener pastures.

Older drivers who want a life

We live in a world of instant gratification, where enjoying life is a very high priority. Unfortunately the 'work long hours, and put your life on hold' lifestyle of being a long-haul trucker is totally at odds with the goals of society as a whole. There are many drivers in their 50's and 60's who place a higher value on enjoying life than on making a buck. The kids are grown up and have gone away. They have sold the big house, downsized to a smaller less expensive house, and have most of the household things they need. They tend to live a much more frugal lifestyle and do not need to spend as much money to survive as they once did.

These drivers are seeing their friends and relatives get old, sick and die. They are starting to come to think about their own mortality. Many are starting to ask themselves life altering questions, such as: 'What if I spent the next 10 years hustling down the highway only to find out in my early 60's that I have inoperable cancer and will not live to see my next birthday? Am I going to look back and say I wasted those years saving for a retirement I will never get to see? All the plans the wife and I made about enjoying our golden years will have instantly evaporated. Or will I be physically able to do the things in retirement that I am looking forward to doing?' They've come to realize that no one on their deathbed ever said, 'I wish I'd spent more time working'.

Stressed out leads to burned out

Ask any dispatcher about the number of drivers who have meltdowns at the office. Here are adults, sometimes 40 years and older, losing control of their temper. Exhibiting behaviour they have generally outgrown decades ago and would not tolerate from their child for an instant. It starts with a problem they have been stewing over, that erupts into a barrage of cursing and yelling, usually culminating with an 'I quit' as they storm out, and the driver goes home to cool off. About a week later the company usually calls and the whole fracas gets resolved when cooler heads prevail. How many of these outbursts would not happen if the drivers were getting more time off? Which brings us to the most important question, how can we minimize the stresses that lead to this type of behaviour?

On a personal note, the following are some of the challenges I face as a driver. Considering that I live in the truck and am responsible for the truck and load, I can't relax and get away from it all, and am always somewhat on duty while on the road. It often seems that even when I'm home, I'm not off duty either. On my two days off a good portion of my time is spent preparing for my next trip out. Unpack, wash clothes, fold them and pack up again. Shop for supplies, prepare and cook very large meals both nights, keeping the leftovers for meals on the road. On my last night home, I make sandwiches, cook a frozen pizza and package everything individually to eat on the road. Sometimes on my Saturday night, I would be too burned out to even go out to socialize and drink beer with my friends. And to top it off, it was a rare weekend when I did not dream about being out in the truck at least one night. There were even a couple of weekends when I dreamt about being in the truck all three nights I was home! Have you any idea how quickly someone can burn out by not being able to mentally get away from the job? Being a long-haul trucker is without a doubt the most all-consuming and intense job experience I have ever had.

As a driver, I am amazed at how scheduling anything on a day off can become such an ordeal. It seems like I am constantly planning and scheming all week to make sure I manage to be home to attend the most trivial of affairs. There are many times I have partially or totally missed the event, or only through herculean effort managed to arrive at the last minute. When I would miss a planned event, I would invariably think, 'I have done nothing fun, but work for the past few weeks and have been looking forward to this immensely. Now because of obstacles due to work I missed the first bit of fun to come over the horizon in a long time'. This type of situation can truly wear down a person.

While most companies have dental and drug plans, it is incredibly difficult to make an appointment and keep it. Scheduling medical appointments usually go like this for drivers: 'Wednesday at 13:00, probably can't make it. What have you got on a Monday morning?... Oh, not til next month. I guess that will have to do. O-K, see you then.'

How many drivers with families arrive home to a cold reception because they missed an important family function? Saying, 'sorry dear, I really tried to make it home on time, but...', starts to wear thin after a short time. How many drivers are missing the milestones of their loved ones personal lives, and what kind of an effect is that having on them and the family? Care to guess what happens when a driver says, 'damn it, I'm in the doghouse again for missing that important family event last week, and this is really starting to get on my nerves'.

Retaining drivers will require innovative solutions

Companies that want to keep their experienced drivers for a long time are going to have to start thinking like drivers. Making sure the drivers who need it, get more time off than just 2 or 3 weeks per year, will enable them to stay in the game for the long haul. Innovative ways of thinking will help companies keep drivers working for them for many years to come. This will cut down on driver attrition through burn-out and save companies the money and effort of finding new drivers.

In an all or nothing scenario (where a driver works between 5-10 days on and two days off for 50 weeks per year) many overworked drivers will opt for quitting a company, taking a few months off to unwind and then going to look for another carrier to work for. Many drivers do not find this a great way to operate, but it seems to be the only way for them to avoid total burn out. Unfortunately this way of thinking is especially costly for the companies. Because the truck that makes the least amount of revenue is the one sitting idle in the yard without a driver.

Possible workplace options

How many drivers near retirement age are choosing to quit, even though they still enjoy driving? Many cannot keep up the pace of full-time driving, but would be willing to keep on driving part-time? Who'd be willing to bet there are a great many retirement age drivers who would be interested in driving one week a month, just for something to do? How many full time drivers would be willing to work 6 on, 2 off; 6 on, 2 off; 6 on, then have a week off, while the retiree took the truck for 5 to 6 days?

How about having 2 drivers slip seating in one truck? If each driver had the truck for 7 days straight they could probably each get 3000+ miles per week. Their yearly pay would not be 50% less by working 7 out of 14 days vrs. a 10 out of 14 day schedule. Most people are willing to work harder knowing they will soon get time off to recuperate.

Then you could have 3 drivers working two trucks. Each driver has a truck for 2 weeks on duty followed by a week off. Each driver would work 6 days on 2 days off and 6 days on in a 14 day stretch. The 2 days off in the middle would be for the driver to reset his clock, do laundry and replenish the food supply. This would also enable the company to do maintenance on the truck. Then at the end of the 2 weeks, the driver who just finished a week off, would take the truck for his two week shift. Each driver would rotate from one truck to the other truck after his week off. The table below gives a visual representation of how it would work.

	week 1	week 2	week 3	week 4	week 5	week 6
Truck 1	drv a	drv a	drv b	drv b	drv c	drv c
Truck 2	drv b	drv c	drv c	drv a	drv a	drv b

This model could be amended to work with 4 drivers and 3 trucks, for 3 weeks of work and 1 week off rotation. Obstacles regarding the cleanliness of the trucks would have to be ironed out between the drivers, perhaps applying a fine for leaving the truck dirty would be a possible solution. Also letting drivers choose the others they share the truck with would keep problems like this to a minimum. While all of the solutions proposed will require time and effort from the companies, the ability to retain veteran drivers will make it all worthwhile.

Keeping drivers in an economic downturn

The coming economic uncertainty will also be a difficult time for companies trying to retain drivers. It is important to make sure the drivers who are in the cab are working. It is incredibly frustrating to be sitting in the yard waiting for a run most of the day and getting a short run of 200 miles at 16:00. No one wants to spend the majority of their days waiting around to end up with a total of 1000 miles on a slow week.

Some drivers need the money. While these drivers will have to make do with a few less miles than in good times, other drivers who want more time off could give up an occasional run to those who need the extra miles. Find the drivers who are willing to take extra time off in slow periods and work out a plan with them. Do not have them waiting around at home for the phone to ring, just in case there is a run for them to take. Waiting around at home is not the same as having the day off and being able to go out and run errands or do something constructive.

The challenge of the future

Sustainability is a concept that will become increasingly important for driver retention in the long-haul trucking industry. The current crop of drivers are getting older and younger drivers are not flooding the market in the numbers needed to make up the shortfall. Driver turnover due to burn out is going to keep on hurting long-haul trucking companies as drivers get older. Since the truck that makes the least amount of revenue is the one sitting idle in the yard without a driver. Progressive trucking companies are going to have to look at and adopt innovative ways to keep current drivers happily working for as long as possible. The major challenge to the trucking industry is finding ways to be flexible enough to entice veteran drivers to put off their ultimate retirement and still haul freight well into the future. The solution will be allowing drivers to find that ideal balance between the need to make money and the desire for time off to enjoy their life.