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Driver shortage



The trucking industry is facing a long-term shortage of skilled and qualified Class 5 drivers. This is more apparent in some sectors of the industry and in particular regions of the country. Although it does fluctuate with the New Zealand economy, the overall trend is an increasing shortage, especially when you consider that the freight task in New Zealand is expected to grow in excess of 40 percent over the next 30 years.

There are a number of key issues that

are underlining the driver shortage:

The average age of a truck driver is over 50 years, although all industries are facing the problems associated with an aging population, and as such the trucking industry has to compete with other industries for a shrinking and aging labour pool. Workers are going to the jobs that provide the best mix of remuneration, quality of life and training.

It is hard for school leavers to enter the industry because of the time it takes to get

the various licence classes, especially if they did not get their Class 1 licence at 16 years. These age restrictions are encouraging school leavers to look at alternative careers. Driver licensing in conjunction with improved training needs to be more streamlined to encourage new entrants to the industry.

Trucking operators need to put more effort into attracting drivers, from school leavers, mid-career changers and women, who could be attracted with more flexible

work environments. They need to recognise that drivers are their most important asset, the face of their business. They deserve respect, and their welfare is at the core of your businesses success.

As an industry we need to work hard to improve the public's perception of our industry, which is influenced by such things as driver behaviour, following too close, stock effluent, presentation of vehicles, inappropriate speed etc. Trucking operators need to improve driver training and lead by example. By encouraging your drivers to a higher skill level, your business will be rewarded with lower fuel use, less R&M issues, more satisfied customers and a better public perception.

The trucking industry says that it wants to improve the quality of drivers, but it does not have a training culture. The industry tends to look at training as a cost, instead of an investment. The normal strategy is to let someone else train the drivers, and then try and poach them. The industry complains that driving is not viewed as a skilled career, but given the lack of entry level training, and the lack of commitment to on-going training it is hard to argue that it is. Keeping your drivers informed of legislation changes, ORS, road rules, customer requirements and fostering a culture of law abidance should be a priority.

The industry needs to implement a training culture with a minimum standard of entry level. Apprenticeship or apprenticeship type driver training should be mandatory. Truck driving needs to be considered a skilled trade and recognised as such by the various levels of government. The industry should be encouraging the development of a cadetship type system for school leavers. The cost of driver licensing and driver training needs to be lower to remove barriers for new entrants to the industry. There should be a program of mandatory on-going training, and or recertification throughout a driver's career (eg Operator Rating System, pre-trip inspections, load security, hazardous goods, driving hours, road code etc). The industry needs to invest in its human capital. It is generally acknowledged that for the hours worked, driver's wages are no longer

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competitive with alternative employment options.

Trucking operators need to understand their costs better, and make the case to their customers for freight rates that support increased driver remuneration. This has a flow on effect to owner/drivers. If you employ owner/drivers, make your margin from the freight rate you charge your customers, not

how much margin you can squeeze out of the owner/driver.

Wages are paid for by revenue generated – outgoings affect your bottom line – the circle tightens. I believe that we don't have a driver shortage due to skills, or the ability to learn those skills, we have a shortage due to the remuneration and lifestyle that we provide.

Many a good driver can be found when you place an ad online for drivers – salary or wage rate \$80,000 plus per year, home each night. Try it – you will have them hammering at your door.

As an industry our fundamental issue is that we do not charge enough for what we do, therefore we have to trim all the way down our cost structures and the driver or owner driver for that matter in many cases is an easy option to keep lean. It is somewhat harder to negotiate with a fuel or finance company for cost savings.

If many trucking operators put their business through one of the associations Cost Models, they would be quite distressed about the end result, but the upside is that they would then know that they need to make changes, before they wake up one morning and find the fuel cards have been stopped and the repossession agent is at the door.

Truck driving can be an unhealthy lifestyle for many, with long periods away from home, long hours, a sedentary lifestyle, poor sleep, poor hygiene and diet. Drivers are susceptible to obesity, sleep apnea, diabetes, and heart disease and life expectancy can be lower than other occupations.

Drivers' wellbeing should be a top priority for employers, they should be able to plan their off duty time without the expectation of interruption by their employer. Trucking operators can influence drivers' lifestyles by exercising control over despatchers, schedules, hours of work, and health and safety practices. Trucking operators should promote healthier lifestyles, by helping focus on diet, health checks, exercise and sleep.

Trucking is a tough business, but ultimately it can control its own destiny if it chooses to. ■

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