



Hiring and retaining good drivers in the face of industry challenges

By Mike Yonka – Corporate Safety Services Specialist, Sentry Insurance

The transportation industry is experiencing some unprecedented challenges. Through my observations and discussions with leaders across the trucking world, two recurring—and related—themes reveal themselves: a shortage of qualified applicants, and an abundance of demand.

This is hardly new information to those of us who spend each and every day in this industry, but it's still worth addressing—and seeking solutions. We won't solve these complex issues overnight, but on a more granular level, what can your company do to maintain your standards and keep your top drivers in these challenging times?

REVIEW YOUR HIRING PROCESS

If you're involved in hiring new drivers, you likely feel pressure from several directions. The hiring manager wants to fill empty positions and the safety director is scouring applicants' resumes and MVRs, all while your chief financial officer is watching the margins closely. Meanwhile, your current drivers need raises to keep up with the cost of living and industry trends, and customers won't agree to a rate hike. What can you do?

Ultimately, that's up to you and your fellow leaders. But what you **shouldn't** do: Lower your hiring standards.

Your hiring standards are your company's first line of defense in avoiding catastrophic losses. Lowering your standards would only temporarily resolve a single issue—your driver shortage—while dramatically increasing your long-term risk exposure. Your good drivers will notice, and they could start looking for another carrier where they aren't associated with unsafe drivers.

Note: Of course, this discussion is based on the understanding that your company already has a clearly defined hiring policy. If you don't have a minimum standard detailed in writing, start there and work with your human resources and legal professionals to do so.

ASSESS YOUR COMPANY CULTURE AND DRIVER BENEFITS

I've noticed that trucking companies successfully navigating this complicated environment share a key characteristic: A strong company culture.

You don't necessarily need to be the highest paying company to retain or attract talented drivers, but your drivers need to feel appreciated and heard. Regular communication is a necessary component of a positive company culture. If the only time a driver hears from you is when something's wrong, they're not going to feel valued—in fact, they could start dreading every phone call or email.

Look for opportunities in your fleet. Identify what your drivers want in addition to their compensation and benefits packages. Additionally, recognize that the landscape of our industry has changed a lot in recent years. Much of the OTR model has shifted from long-haul operations to regional, which means many drivers are able to spend weekends with their families. If you don't currently offer regularly scheduled home time, consider starting soon—or figure out another option to make up for that time.



INCENTIVIZE AND REWARD GOOD DRIVING

Do you have a driver recognition program in place? If so, how do your drivers feel about it? Exploring new ways to celebrate your drivers is a good way to promote retention. Offer referral bonuses, hiring bonuses, performance-based incentives, and a strong work/life balance. Reward and recognize high performers as well as the rising stars.

Start small and work your way up. Also, be sure to ask your insurance provider if they have resources they could provide to help you recognize exemplary drivers.

INVEST IN DRIVER TRAINING

The FMCSA recently mandated entry-level driver training requirements (ELDTRs), an important first step in helping companies like you ensure your operators are qualified for the jobs they're asked to do.

ELDTRs can help eliminate a lot of the guesswork out of hiring entry-level drivers. Use this to your advantage. It's possible your insurance provider has a training program for qualified carriers, giving you a unique opportunity to develop the fleet you need in real time:

- Develop a written training program with clear objectives and goals for trainees and documentation resources for trainers
- Set up weekly check calls with each trainer to help ensure the program is running smoothly

CONCLUSION

I acknowledge that many of these steps are easier to discuss as hypotheticals than they are to implement—especially when you're struggling to find drivers or set a budget. But trust me: You'd face exponentially higher financial and reputational risks by relaxing your hiring standards and making exceptions to your written guidelines.

Hold fast to your standards and find a way to attract what you need. By rewarding good drivers and investing in safety and training resources, you'll likely find that safety-conscious prospective drivers who want to be valued, compensated, and surrounded by other good drivers will seek you out.

And that's the beginning of a sustainable solution for you—and, hopefully, the industry as a whole.

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