

## Recruiting the next generation of truck drivers

As the current pool of experienced heavy motor drivers approaches retirement age, the industry needs to look further afield to attract replacements with the right risk attitude.

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The problem with truck driving as an occupation is a lack of succession planning.

With many experienced truck drivers now approaching retirement age, the challenge for the industry is finding suitable new recruits from a younger generation and providing them with the necessary training. To make the occupation more appealing to a wider group of potential employees, the industry needs to counteract some of its less attractive aspects.

For starters, it's dangerous. According to Safe Work Australia, transport is the deadliest industry, with more than 74 deaths in the last 12 months. It's also isolating and stressful, with long hours spent alone on the road. And there's not much scope for flexibility – one of the key workplace perks offered by four in five companies named in BRW's 2013 Top 50 Places to Work list.

On the flip side, heavy motor jobs can be very well paid – it's not unheard of for experienced drivers in the bush to earn upwards of \$160,000 per annum – and highly autonomous, with relatively few barriers to career entry. To get started, all you need to do is reach a minimum driving experience level to qualify to obtain the appropriate licence.

To make the occupation more appealing to a younger age group, truck driving needs a new image.

Turning the job into more of a profession, with increased certification and education, would go a long way towards improving the industry's image as well as addressing some endemic issues. And putting some structure in place around recruitment, training and compliance within many transport companies would assist this process.

The problem with quite a few large freight companies is that they have grown organically from small operations into sizeable businesses employing sometimes upwards of 200 people without putting in place the disciplines needed to support their new business structure. These companies also often overly rely on word of mouth to find new drivers rather than casting their net to a wider pool.

The safe operation of a heavy vehicle depends almost entirely on two key factors:

1. The driver's skill, behaviour and attitude
2. Ongoing maintenance of the truck (e.g. brake adjustments, use of quality tyres etc.).

It goes without saying that poorly matched or bad drivers are at an increased risk of having an accident, which has the potential to ruin the business' reputation. Appropriate driver selection will help to reduce the alarming rise in single vehicle heavy motor accidents recently, which have contributed to 75 per cent of all large claims in the past three years.

So what type of person makes a good truck driver?

Probably the most important quality to look for is an appropriate attitude to risk management – someone who won't cut corners to complete a task in a timeframe; an individual who is patient and always puts their personal safety and that of the community first.

The ARM Survey from PaQS is a really useful tool for sizing up a potential new recruit's attitude to and awareness of safety. The survey asks questions centred on simple workplace and life experiences to measure the individual's awareness, knowledge, conceptual orientation and perception of safety and risk. There are no obvious right or wrong answers.

More steps you should take when employing new drivers include:

- Establish their experience in both the licence category and freight task; always run the necessary RTA checks to confirm qualifications
- Review employment relevant to the licence category; ask referees questions around the driver's experience, attitude, personal qualities and previous incidents or near misses
- Examine the candidate's vehicle operational skills; get your driver trainer to accompany them – to get beyond their best behaviour to their business-as-usual style
- Determine their ability to manage the required radius of operation
- Establish their skill and ability for managing fatigue
- Obtain any necessary medical tests.

When on-boarding a new driver, it's really important to take into consideration their risk exposure based on previous history. For example, if the driver has no long-haul experience then asking them to perform these duties could place them in danger.

When employing less experienced drivers – or giving existing employees new duties – here are some additional steps you should take to improve their skills:

- Run improved driver safety training at multiple times during the year with a focus on operating heavy vehicles with care and consideration
- Offer opportunities for drivers to develop their career through cross-training in different freight tasks; create a buddy system for up-skilling people in different areas
- Provide driver attitude training to deal with the frustration that comes with performing different freight tasks.

It's also important not to take anything at face value when hiring new drivers or to overly rely on word-of-mouth information. Lumley recently had a claim where the insured was as surprised as we were that the employee behind the wheel didn't possess the necessary licence for the vehicle class.

Insurance companies pick and choose risks. The significant increase in claims costs in recent years will make it increasingly difficult for heavy motor companies that don't effectively manage their driver risks to get the cover they need at an affordable price.

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