

How to Keep Good Drivers

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It is no secret that trucking faces a driver shortage crisis. Unfortunately, many driver-strapped carriers have responded by over funding additional recruitment efforts, while allocating few, if any, resources to retention - a strategy as effective as pumping diesel into a tank with a disconnected fuel line.

Funding a successful driver workforce strategy must include investing in an effective driver retention program, and for that you begin by understanding why your drivers are leaving.

In May, I concluded a comprehensive study of printed and online industry publications to collect and analyze the reasons drivers give for leaving a company. Listed below are the 11 factors the study found to be primary "influences" on a driver's decision to stay or leave:

- . **Compensation** - wages, benefits, bonuses and the percentage of total hours worked that are actually paid for.
- . **Communication** - customer requirements, company policies, newsletters, home mailings/and any feedback process for driver suggestions.
- . **Problem resolution** - equipment breakdowns, delays at customer facilities, payroll problems, special requests and family emergencies.
- . **Respect and honesty** - recognition, whether drivers have equal stature with field management and whether they are always told the truth.
- . **Actual job duties and compensation the same as recruited for** - how job requirements match with what the recruiter said and whether expectations and compensation were clearly and honestly communicated during the interview.
- . **Equipment age** - vehicle's appearance, comfort and image.
- . **Equipment Maintenance** - vehicle's availability, minimum breakdowns.
- . **Not enough home time** - load distribution, dispatch hours, whether driver gets home for holidays.
- . **Adequate training** - knowledgeable trainers, driver mentors, whether drivers are fully trained before they are expected to perform.
- . **Clear and fair working rules** - published and enforced company policy, fair load distribution, whether all drivers are treated equally.
- . **Advancement opportunities** - advancement to management or other, higher-paying driver positions.

The influences above are listed in no particular order because the strength of any one influence is unique to each company, depending on how it manages the other 10 influences. For example, a coast-to-coast trucking company with good wages and solid benefits might score high marks for compensation, only to lose drivers who feel they do not get enough time at home. Conversely, a strictly local company could score well on home time, but may lose drivers to higher-paying jobs.

The study also noted whether primary responsibility for managing each influence rested with the company's "corporate" management or with "field" personnel.

Since the field has the most direct and frequent contact with drivers, it was not surprising that the study found it had primary responsibility for the majority of driver retention influences listed above, specifically: communication, problem resolution, respect and honesty, equipment maintenance, home time, adequate driver training and clear and fair working rules.

Corporate management, which controls policy and capital expenditures, was found directly responsible for only three influences, but they were significant - compensation, equipment age and opportunities for drivers to advance.

The 11th influence - "actual job duties and compensation the same as recruited for" - was the exception, with primary responsibility going to the person conducting the job interview, whether part of the corporate or field management teams.

The study also ranked each influence according to the cost of improving its positive aspects, with the two most expensive being compensation and equipment age, both corporate responsibilities.

However, one of the least expensive to improve - advancement opportunities - also is a corporate influence.

The seven least expensive, influences to improve turn out to be the primary responsibility of the field. That provides two useful insights: First, the majority of reasons drivers have for leaving require only a small investment of capital to repair. Second, the relationship field management maintains with its drivers is critical to the retention performance of any terminal.

The five field-driven influences on driver retention that are the least expensive to improve are:

- . Respect and honesty.
- . Clear and fair working rules.
- . Communication.
- . Problem resolution.
- . Adequate training.

The two remaining influences - equipment maintenance and not enough home time - fall in the middle of the cost range.

Understanding these influences is the first step in building an effective program for keeping drivers. The next is to define how your drivers rank your company's performance for each influence. How? Ask them. Create and distribute a driver-retention questionnaire.

The questionnaire should be formatted to accomplish three things. First, it should ask two or three questions about each influence on driver retention, structuring multiple-choice answers in a consistent format to allow for easy quantification. A recommended format for a question offering three multiple-choice answers and their scores is:

- "Yes," "definitely" or some other very positive response - 1.
- "Average" or "some of the time," a middle-of-the road ranking - 2.
- "Never" or "hardly ever," a very negative response - 3.

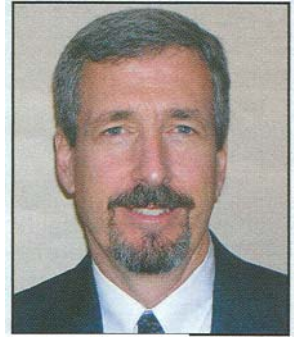
This format allows for easy analysis when averaging the answers for each influence on driver retention, and comparing rankings between influences. For example, this methodology would mean that a 1.3 ranking for any influence indicates a high level of performance, while a 2.7 would indicate poor performance.

The second formatting objective is to capture driver profiles. Questions regarding driver tenure, board and type, e.g., company vs. owner-operator, are very important for the analysis. You may discover, for example, that drivers with less than three months tenure are the most dissatisfied with "communication" and "respect and honesty." That observation might lead you to improve influence performance through revisions to your recruiting and new-employee orientation programs, or by assigning supervisory mentors to all new drivers.

The third objective of the questionnaire is to provide a forum for unstructured driver feedback through open-ended questions. This is an excellent opportunity not only to receive additional input on influence performance but also to collect operating insight from the employees who do the work.

General questions, such as "What can we do to make you more productive?" will provide a rare opportunity for drivers to openly discuss their suggestions and complaints. You should also include questions soliciting revenue-generating or cost-saving ideas. A driver's behind-the-wheel perspective offers valuable insights you cannot get from your field management team.

After questionnaire results are analyzed, your company will have a solid foundation upon which to build a truly effective program for retaining drivers. At that point, the company can begin to make informed decisions about balancing resource investments between recruiting and retention efforts within a larger driver workforce strategy.



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