



The Frontline Approach to Driver Retention Show Drivers You Care

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Rarely a week goes by that we, at Motor Transport Underwriters, aren't being asked by a client for ideas to help improve driver recruiting. My first response is why are drivers leaving and what are you doing to retain your existing personnel? Many times there is an awkward silence on the other end of the line. High driver turnover seems to be a condition inherent to the industry. However, it baffles me why we accept this as an inevitable fact of life in trucking.

Approximately 70% of the companies we see simply do not have an adequate mechanism in place to retain existing drivers. Yet, great resources are expended to keep new driver orientation classes full with a steady stream of fresh faces. Sometimes I think there is a subconscious feeling in the industry that it may be easier to find new drivers than retain existing personnel. However, driver retention can be drastically improved with moderate effort and the establishment of a *Driver Care* initiative.

Finding Out Why the Driver Leaves

The first step towards solving any problem is first identifying the root cause. Most companies we see simply do not have reliable data on why drivers leave. Granted, it may be difficult talking face to face with a driver when they decide to quit on the road. However, why not follow-up by phone within the week and ask the driver why the company did not meet their needs. This information will prove invaluable in formulating a driver retention plan. I have worked with clients that have even gotten drivers back through such a conversation.

This process is, however, reactive. How do we use this information to improve driver turnover before it happens? In most cases we find some type of operations-related issue caused the driver departure. This can be anything from too little freight to a disagreement with a dispatcher or driver manager. Drivers also have personal issues that may lead to their leaving.

Partnership between Driver and Driver Manager

An often over-looked key to driver retention is the driver manager or dispatcher. These individuals are the primary link between the company and driver. They may speak several times a day with the driver. Each interaction has the potential of either causing yet another driver departure or fostering a long-term relationship. By following these simple steps your front-line operations personnel can greatly reduce the need for new driver recruits.

First, a partnership must be encouraged between the driver and manager or dispatcher. In order to achieve this, each driver must be assigned to a specific dispatcher. This allows for consistency and over time, a solid working relationship that will make your operation more efficient and profitable while improving retention.

The next step is to properly train and support operations personnel. Oftentimes driver frustrations begin with poor communication or the feeling they are not important to the company. Frontline personnel must be trained to effectively communicate information the driver needs to do his or her job. Most importantly, they must be trained to listen. The dispatcher must become the eyes and ears for the company when it comes to driver management and retention.

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They must also know how to recognize changes in a driver's behavior that could signal a potential problem. These could include personal problems, family issues, health concerns or just a general change in the driver's attitude. We have known for some time personal distractions contribute to accident frequency and severity. In studying drivers who left companies, many times these types of issues also led to the departure. Most frustrating is the fact a simple accommodation, such as a day off, could have saved the driver.

Training for Operations and Upper-Management

We usually start the training process with an initial seminar for operations and management personnel. It is then important for the education to continue through periodic meetings or refresher training to keep the goals in the forefront. This also allows operations personnel to formally share ideas on how to continually improve the program. This better promotes ownership among the dispatch personnel.

Many times we have seen great ideas or programs initiated within organizations. However, the company fails to build an adequate support structure to support this Driver Care initiative. A formal mechanism must be created and supported to take this information provided by the frontline personnel and actually do something about it. The individual or team charged with this responsibility may also have to determine the validity of some of these concerns.

There are also times when the driver may have a problem or issue that involves the dispatcher or driver manager. If the issue cannot first be resolved through normal channels, they must have the option to communicate these concerns directly to the *Driver Care Team*. In most companies this does not have to be a fulltime position. Some organizations use volunteers.

Once the structure has been set, there has to be a way to measure the success of each dispatcher or driver manager. Many companies only measure and reward production of frontline operations personnel. Aside from the obvious liability defense problems this can cause, it doesn't send the best message to personnel. We like to see performance measures for dispatchers/driver managers include driver turnover, accidents, log violations from company audits and roadside driver out-of-service in addition to productivity. This promotes team building and gives operations personnel encouragement to take responsibility for the activities of the driver.

These are just some of the primary initiatives we use to start a Driver Care program. As the program grows, it can also be expanded to bring drivers' families into the mix. Operations and driver incentive programs can also be structured to better promote the process.

The bottom line is we lose drivers because we do not do everything possible to forge a bond between driver and company. These drivers generally aren't leaving the industry. They wander from company to company looking to have their basic needs met. Rebuilding an organization around meeting these needs will indeed lead to a more efficient and profitable organization. In the process organizations will also reap the benefits of improved customer service, regulatory compliance and accident experience.

For More Information on the Motor Transport Underwriters "Driver Care" program please contact Jeff Davis at 1-800-809-3660 ext. 2034 or by email at jdavis@mtuinc.com <<mailto:jdavis@mtuinc.com>>.