



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
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...from the
director's chair

Finding the right fit (Part 1)

"Do you know any good carriers?" Of the dozens of calls and e-mails I get in a week, that's one of the questions I get asked most often. It was such a frequent question eight years ago that it prompted a column, and I find it quite remarkable that despite significant changes in the industry in the intervening years, it still tops the list of FAQs.

For an industry so concerned about the shortage of qualified drivers that it has its own Web site (drivershortage.ca), the stories I hear from disillusioned drivers demonstrates that many carriers still don't see drivers as a valuable and non-renewable resource.

But it works both ways: despite near-record demand, drivers are often all too eager to accept the next job offer they get, even if it's no better than the job they are leaving.

So on the one hand, you have all these good drivers looking for good carriers, and on the other, good carriers are telling me they can't find good drivers: what kind of magic is going to bring these folks together?

You're sinking a lot into a relationship when you hire on with a carrier – your livelihood, your lifestyle, your health and safety – so of course you want that relationship to last.

It's not unlike getting married; you have to really know your partner before you get hitched. That's more imperative today than ever before.

The American Compliance, Safety and Accountability program, for example, and the widespread use (and inevitable mandate) of electronic logging devices has put more pressure than ever on fleets to "run compliant," and fleets that rely on drivers to make up for lost time and various inefficiencies won't survive long in this new world. Nor will fleets that make unrealistic promises of available miles and earning potential. Avoid them like the plague!

I'm not so sure you can define a good or bad carrier (or a good or bad driver for that matter) – beyond the obvious – in universal terms. It really comes down to finding the job that suits your needs – and maybe more importantly, your

temperament and expectations.

And today, I think most drivers would agree that it's not all about the money.

More than ever, a carrier's management style, its attitude to driver health and wellness, its relationships with customers, the driving environment, and even the company's approach to safety and compliance, are likely to factor into your carrier-choice decision.

I know two owner/ops working for the same carrier: one loves it; the other – as you guessed – hates it. One's making money hand over fist, the other's barely getting by. If I suggested that particular carrier might be worth checking out, there's a good chance you wouldn't like it either. Or you might love it. And that's just the point here.

Can I recommend a good carrier? No way. But I can offer a few tips on how to narrow down your choices.

First, you need to identify what's important in a job, and this requires you be honest and realistic.

Your relationship with any carrier is a two-way street, so you have to be willing to give and take when making your wish list. And leave the money out of the question for this part of the exercise.

Examine aspects like long or short runs; destinations or lanes; time away; minimum and maximum mileages; LTL, straight loads, or pin-to-pin; driver load/unload, sorting and stacking; border crossing; and so on. And think about the kind of carrier environment you want to work in: large or small; highly structured and corporate or a more laid-back, "take it as it comes" company.

Next, what kind of a worker are you? Do you want straight miles or are you willing to work a little for some extra money, like earning for picks and drops, pre-loading and unloading trailers? Are you a customer service-oriented driver, or do you prefer to get in, get loaded, and get out?

When you've sorted out what will make you

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happy, consider how much you expect to earn for the work you do. While what the carrier pays never seems quite enough, your expectations have to be realistic.

Here's where it pays to have done a thorough financial self-analysis.

How much revenue do you need to cover all the business expenses (cost-per-mile), your personal needs, and, if you're an owner/operator, your profit?

It all comes down to planning before you start calling carriers. Too often, I hear from drivers who've jumped out of the frying pan and right into the fire.

They didn't do their research before switching jobs, and the job they took to escape turns out to be just as bad – or worse – than the one they left.

More than ever the relationship between the carrier and its drivers and owner/operators has to be based on openness and fairness. There isn't a carrier in the country that isn't hiring now, or at least taking applications. You can make a real difference in the hiring outcome if you go in with your ducks in a row and demand a fair shake from the carrier.

Conversely, drivers and owner/operators who have unrealistic expectations – financial or otherwise – could find themselves unhirable, which is why I say it's so important today that drivers and fleets understand each other's needs.

Next month, I'll share the secrets of conducting a thorough interview with a carrier.

You should be asking just as many questions as you're answering – and who knows? Maybe the magic will happen.