



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Closing the gap

Seems OBAC is making its mark in the trucking world; I'm proud to tell you that I've just been named to the board of directors of the Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council (CTHRC), one of several industry-led sector councils funded by Human Resources and Social Development whose mission is to help recruit, train, and retain the people industry needs to meet current and long-term requirements.

The board is made up of representatives of all the industry stakeholders, including for-hire and private carriers, unions, training institutions, insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, and industry associations. And now with OBAC at the table, owner/operators and drivers will have a say in how trucking handles its future human resource challenges – and believe me, they are many.

Recently, I attended a session called "Closing the Gap," aimed at identifying some of the challenges we face getting more people interested in trucking, and further, how best to get those people qualified for the available jobs. Getting young people interested in a career in trucking isn't easy; there are more employment opportunities available today than ever in the past, and many of them offer terrific pay, flexible hours, and good prospects for career advancement. Sadly, not the same can be said for trucking.

Nevertheless, there's evidence that inquiries at driving schools are still strong, suggesting there's no shortage of people considering a career in trucking – including second career people and northern and rural residents – but that's where another challenge arises: filling the gap between the entry-level skills required to earn a licence, and those required to be effective in a career at the wheel.

Licensing standards vary from province to province, and rarely meet the needs of industry. Trucking has traditionally demanded a high level of skill upon entering the indus-

try; there's no "B" team in trucking. Every load is the real thing, and every driver needs to be able to handle any situation they'll run into, if you'll pardon the pun.

Many training programs are developed to meet minimum licensing requirements, and half of Canada's entry-level drivers get their licence with no formal schooling at all.

That's why we have so many newly minted licence holders unable to meet the hiring requirements of the good carriers. So instead of becoming qualified drivers the industry so desperately needs, they go on to learn every bad habit in the book by getting their "experience" with one of the less-than-stellar carriers.

Which brings us to the next hurdle: if we make it tougher to get a licence, while it might ultimately get rid of the so-called licence mills, it could also raise the cost of turning out the kind of driver a carrier will hire right out of school. And who's going to pay for that?

Good schooling already costs a bundle. With tuition fees at the better driving schools running between \$6,000 and \$8,500, students with no income can ill-afford the courses. Trainees are seldom eligible for funding programs, and do not receive the tax credits associated with community college and university tuitions. And there is no financial help at all for Canadians who want to trade low-paying jobs for a higher-paying career in the trucking industry.

So if training is already too expensive, how can we justify adding more to the curriculum, stiffening the standards, and increasing the length and cost of the course if there's no guarantee of immediate employment?

It's clear we need to explore different and creative funding arrangements, and it's essential that they be linked to minimum national licensing and training standards.

But carrier buy-in is also essential if this is

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going to work. Carriers need to invest more in the development of their future workforce and help pay for training to the standard they demand. I would challenge carriers to get involved in helping establish these standards by working in closer partnership with schools, then supporting schools with accredited curricula by hiring their students.

Maybe carriers should actually shorten the wish list they take to the schools, shifting some of the burden and cost away from the prospective students. Why not let the schools concentrate on the basics of steering and gearing – and graduate good, safe drivers – while the carriers pick up the tab for the administrative training like clearing Customs, managing HOS, map reading, and so on?

Many of the things that turn a good class A licence holder into a truck driver are better learned out on the road doing the job anyway. This is the beauty of concepts like Ontario's new voluntary apprenticeship program – something we should be encouraging other jurisdictions to look at.

And if carriers are going to bear the cost of finishing off the training the driving schools began, I'd support new funding mechanisms that divvy up the available dollars accordingly.

As we drive change toward a higher level of professionalism in an effort to attract new people to the industry, let's not forget it's equally important to reward that skill and professionalism with the higher pay and lifestyle benefits superior workers expect – or we'll never be able to keep them.