



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Well enough to face the future?

The future of trucking – a topic that's on everyone's mind as the industry begins to pull out from the worst couple of years in modern transportation history – was also the subject of a symposium hosted in Winnipeg Feb. 17-19 by the University of Manitoba's forward-thinking Transport Institute (UMTI).

Some of the industry's biggest shooters from both sides of the border were there to ponder how trucking will evolve in response to changing freight movement patterns, environmental concerns, fuel price volatility, and labour availability over the next 20 years.

No discussion about the future is possible without tackling the very large issues of climate change, emerging vehicle technologies, and massive investments in infrastructure, but it was the labour question – where do truck drivers fit into the equation? – that enticed me to venture to Winterpeg in mid-February.

In a session on the future of trucking human resources, with a focus on women in trucking, I had the pleasure of sharing the podium with two of my long-time trucking colleagues, Linda Gauthier, executive director of the Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council, and Ellen Voie, president and CEO of the Wisconsin-based Women in Trucking organization.

I was the last speaker, in the last session, on the last day of the event, and even though I love having the last word, I'd like to have seen human resources – the men and women who'll be driving the industry into the future – brought into the discussion a whole lot earlier.

Don't get me wrong, everyone's talking about shifting demographics, and the threat of a qualified driver shortage has been scaring the daylights out of truck owners for years.

But trucking has been slow to understand how profound an impact demographic changes will have on our industry. Only a

handful of enlightened companies have begun to focus on human resource management as a critical success factor, and concepts like retention, succession planning, career development and work-life balance have only recently made it into the lexicon when we talk about human resources.

Trucking isn't the only industry plagued by the dreaded S-word; almost every sector of the economy is facing shortages as the population of the industrialized world grows older, and peoples' attitudes and expectations toward jobs and work changes.

The gurus have been talking about work/life conflict for years, but it's only recently, with tightening labour markets and studies that show how work/life imbalance affects the bottom line – there's a huge cost to low job satisfaction and higher job stress – that employers are starting to recognize that it's not good enough any more to talk about best practices, you actually have to be the best practice.

Trucking's not quite there yet – it should be – but it's getting there faster as more women get behind the wheel. Right now, only about 3-5% of commercial drivers in Canada are women, but that number is growing. Many organizations and employers are making a concerted effort to attract women to the industry, as the traditional labour pool of drivers dries up.

Women are agents of change. They simply won't put up with a lot of things that men think they have to live with. Take home time, for example. Women and men, especially if they have young families or aging parents want more home time, and women are questioning why they can't have it. And let's face it – a lot of things that will attract women to the job are things that will make the industry better and safer for everybody. Who doesn't want safer truck parking, laundry facilities, and cleaner toilets? And what's wrong with a more



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ergonomic truck and seats that fit?

Another critical area employers will have to address is the health and lifestyle issues that are driving – or keeping – many people away from the industry. As regulators and policy makers turn their attention to “human factors” in road safety, so too must industry begin to pay attention to wellness issues that drivers face on the road.

Everyone acknowledges that trucking is a tough and often dangerous job. On top of that, many drivers don't eat well, they get little meaningful physical activity, and they often don't get proper rest. Making and keeping regular medical appointments is just a pipe dream for many drivers, whose personal priorities are almost always trumped by compliance and operational realities.

Wellness should top everyone's list of concerns in any discussion on the future of trucking. If the work, the work environment, or the cumulative effects of the difficult lifestyle compromise a driver's physical or mental health, then the most technologically-advanced trucks, the finest roads our tax dollars can buy, and the best managed companies in the country, won't be worth the paper your welfare cheque is written on.

A safe workplace, a decent wage, a healthy lifestyle, and good life/work balance: these are reasonable employment expectations, and the kind of things that are going to attract anyone to a trucking career. Want to get – and keep – women and men excited about a the job of trucking? Change the job.