



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Looking out for number one

Just when you thought there couldn't possibly be anything new to say about the "driver shortage" issue, some fuel gets thrown on the fire. The long-standing myth vs. crisis debate heated up once again a few weeks ago, when an article published by the U.S. Department of Labor in its Monthly Labor Review concluded that "there is...no reason to think that, given sufficient time, driver supply should fail to respond to price signals in the standard way."

In other words, if driver wages go up enough, there should be no driver shortage.

This, of course, was music to the ears of those in the myth camp, in particular the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA), whose own research contends that the industry isn't afflicted with a shortage of drivers, but is actually plagued with overcapacity and a driver retention problem – and decreasing wages.

As you can imagine, those on the other side of the debate pooh-poohed the research; for example, Bob Costello, chief economist for the American Trucking Association (ATA), claimed the article "demonstrated some basic misunderstandings about the trucking industry generally and how we...in the industry discuss the driver shortage."

And so it goes. Discussion around how to find and keep drivers is nothing new. But in the past couple of years, the conversation has begun to move beyond key issues like driver pay, better work/life balance, and safer working conditions to the "driver-centric" truck.

The role that truck cabs and sleepers play in retaining and recruiting drivers was the subject at a roundtable discussion called 'Spec'ing the cab and sleeper for driver comfort and safety' at the annual meeting of the ATA's Technology & Maintenance Council in March.

The conclusion among panelists was that truck comforts are a powerful recruiting tool. There are added costs, to be sure, but it might be time, agreed the panelists, to think about those driver-friendly spec's as an investment in driver retention.

Things like automated transmissions, for example, were on the list, as were features like adaptive cruise control, that offer a level of comfort as well as safety.

But when it comes to cab and sleeper interiors, premium materials such as wood trim or chrome bezels are just the starting point.

How about "infotainment" offerings ranging from flatscreen TVs to satellite radio, with settings that allow drivers to load more apps onto in-truck tablets? A WiFi hub that offers internet access? Wheel controls that offer

quick access to the radio, cruise control, and telephone? Or those swiveling seats and moveable tables that create livable space in the sleeper?

There is no question that OEMs today are designing increasingly comfortable cab interiors as a vital tool to help fleets attract and retain drivers. Premium seats and mattresses, extra storage, meal prep areas, refrigerators, microwave ovens and ambient LED lighting and dimmer switches are designed to offer drivers "all the comforts of home."

With one glaring exception. No place to go. No one, anywhere, is talking about the business of doing one's business in a truck – toilet facilities to satisfy the most fundamental human function.

Why isn't this even on the list – not of luxury amenities, but of basic, utilitarian features in a truck? What better place to ask the question, I thought, than at the Mid-America Trucking Show in Louisville with a captive audience of some 82,000 visitors and 1,000 exhibitors.

It was not, I discovered, a subject anyone really wanted to have a serious conversation about. Reactions ran the gamut from blank stares, nervous laughter, wrinkled noses, to "potty humor."

Salespeople from OEMs told me they had never, ever been asked if a truck could be spec'd with a portable toilet.

Ironically, Peterbilt actually has a pass-through passenger seat on a couple of models with a storage compartment that can be accessed from both inside and outside the truck. Booth staff at MATS weren't aware, though, that the seat was created with an eye to carrying and storing a driver-supplied portable potty, based on feedback the company got from Women in Trucking Association (WIT) members.

But I got my biggest surprise over in the recruiting pavilion, where I asked 15-20 carriers if their trucks were equipped with any kind of portable toilet facilities for the drivers.

I didn't expect any yeses, but I wasn't prepared for the variety of negative conversations, inane excuses, and in some cases, downright hostility that I would even raise the issue.

Here's a sampling: "Our drivers don't need anything like that, there are lots of truck stops/rest areas where they can go."

"Who wants a smelly toilet in their sleeper?"

"Too heavy, too expensive" (this from a company owner who told me he spent \$10,000 per truck on ame-



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nities to keep his drivers happy).

"Some of our owner-operators put in their own porta-potties, but drivers wouldn't want anything like that."

"It must be a woman thing. Guys don't need a toilet."

"Drivers just learn to hold it." Followed by a chuckle and "I guess we should teach bladder control in orientation."

I came away pretty discouraged, although I was as impressed as anyone else with the full toilet/shower units available from Indiana-based ARI Legacy Sleepers in their 153-inch multi-thousand-dollar luxury sleepers, but that's not the kind of facility I'm talking about.

In fact, those toilets are made for ARI by Thetford Corporation, a Michigan company that has been making RV and camping sanitation products since the 1960s. A couple of years ago, Thetford began marketing its Porta-Potti as a sanitary and odor-free toilet that can go wherever the trucker goes.

Acknowledging the increasing closure of roadside rest stops as the new normal in the lives of truckers, it advertises the Porta-Potti as a safe and convenient way of bringing the facilities with them on the road.

This particular unit is compact, flushable and leak-proof; it's easily emptied and cleaned, weighs less than 14 lbs and is available for under \$300.

Undoubtedly there are other similar products on the market. In other words, there is a completely practical and affordable alternative to a pee bottle or a grocery bag in a bucket, the current fallbacks drivers I spoke with would gladly trade for a viable option.

So, the question remains. If OEMs are creating cab interiors with amenities unheard of just a few years ago, and fleets are willing to add these perks and rewards to their attract-and-retain-drivers' toolkits, why aren't sanitary facilities in a truck number one and number two on the list?

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