



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

A SWIFT solution to the S-word?

One thing trucking is good at is making lists of issues; but I wonder at times if we're not better at cataloguing the issues than we are at actually doing something about them. I mean, most of the top 10 issues have been on the top 10 list as long as we've been trucking.

Highways and infrastructure, fuel prices, and "the driver shortage" have topped the list of trucking concerns for close to – are you ready for this? – one hundred years. As far back as the 1920s there were concerns about the lack of competent, quality truck drivers.

It was problematic enough that Western Truck Owner magazine ran a three-part series in 1928 called "What About Your Driver?" cautioning carriers that drivers are a "vital factor in the success or failure of your business."

Nothing can throw anyone even remotely connected to trucking into a tizzy faster than the dreaded S-word. From dire warnings that the dwindling number of drivers has put the country on a road to ruin, to pegging the so-called shortage as the biggest myth in the industry – everyone has an opinion.

There's no winning side in this debate – because just about every argument has some merit. Some carriers will tell you it's not so much a shortage of drivers coming through the door, as a shortage of drivers that they're prepared to hire. Or those in specialized operations requiring drivers with a specific skill set will grumble about the shrinking supply of drivers who meet their particular needs.

Still others claim that the real problem is not too few drivers, rather too many trucks. And exasperated drivers will argue that the real shortage is not qualified drivers, but a shortage of carriers who understand that it's really a retention problem because of industry working conditions, such as poor pay or diminished quality of life.

Whatever your take on human resources issues in trucking, there is one undeniable fact. Every sector of the economy is facing an alarming shortage of workers, from unskilled labour to highly paid professionals, as the population of the industrialized world grows older and peoples' attitudes

and expectations toward jobs and work change.

In Canada, we have the largest baby boom population in the Western hemisphere. There are now more Canadians over the age of 60 than under the age of five, and the percentage of the labour force that falls into the traditional working age group – 15 to 49 years – is shrinking.

But trucking has been slow to understand the role demographics plays in recruiting and retaining drivers, and many carriers are just now becoming aware of the challenges. They're competing with every other industry for workers from a shrinking labour pool, and the inability of trucking to attract younger workers means they're turning to non-traditional sources, including women, to fill the empty seats.

Trucking is well below the national average when it comes to the participation rate of women. While we represent close to half the Canadian labour force, women represent a mere 3% of Canada's truck drivers, mechanics, transport trailer technicians, and cargo workers, and a piddling percentage of managers, parts technicians and other industry specialists.

This presents a huge economic opportunity for half the Canadian population, which is why women managers and executives from across Canada's trucking industry are joining together to help more women pursue traditionally male-dominated career opportunities in trucking.

Supporting Women in Freight Transportation (SWIFT), spearheaded by Trucking HR Canada, will get down to work at its inaugural meeting at Truck World 2014 in Toronto, and begin developing an employment action plan for women in the trucking industry, including a national employment strategy, identification of best practices, and promotion of trucking as an industry of choice for women.

I'm in heady company on the National Advisory Committee, which includes a cross-section of managers, directors, presidents and executives, who share a common commitment to educating other women about careers in trucking, identifying challenges and barriers to their career paths, and promoting recruiting and retention practices which support women in the workforce.



**Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director**

But make no mistake. If trucking is serious about recruiting women, it has miles to go to make trucking an appealing career choice. Luckily, there's a short list of carriers who recognize this too, as evidenced by the eye-opening report of the CTA's Blue Ribbon Task Force (which did not, by the way, include any women), the first sign of any shift in industry thinking about whose problem the driver shortage is and what can be done about it. That 2012 report was followed by a Conference Board of Canada study, also commissioned by CTA, which cited work-life balance as a key change for recruiters as they replace the retiring generation of truckers.

Among other things critical to bridging the supply and demand gap for drivers, the report cites "significant improvement in industry working conditions and wages...and a reorganization of trucking activity and supply chains in order to reduce pressures on long-haul drivers and make better use of their time."

Women are agents of change. We simply won't put up with a lot of things that men think they have to live with, and one of the things SWIFT will be doing is raising awareness among employers of recruitment and retention practices that can better support the integration of women into the workforce. Holding industry's feet to the fire, so to speak, until they put their money where their mouth is.

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 women – and men – to a trucking career. One hundred years is way too long for any topic to hog the top 10 list.