Owner-Operator's Business Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the director's chair

Two in a tango – Part 1

It all depends on how carefully you choose your partner.

Joanne Ritchie: OBAC executive director

"Do you know any good carriers?" That's a question I get asked a lot when I pick up the phone these days. More often than not, it's a driver who's been left sitting somewhere over a weekend with promises of a load out on Monday. Come Tuesday, they're still sitting – but now they're on the phone looking for a new job.

Or it's a disillusioned owner/op, who's working hard, keeping his or her costs under control, but still can't do much more than break even. In this case, it could be one or a combination of several factors – the carrier isn't passing through enough of a fuel surcharge, or there are just too many idle hours in the week, or it could be the rate's just not good enough.

Or maybe it's someone who's heard me say for the umpteenth time to seek out the "good" carriers, those who are interested in your profitability, and stop supplying a pool of cheap labour that helps keep the bad apples in business. A lot of my driver friends tell me all carriers are the same,and challenge me to read the recruiting ads and tell them the difference.

And I agree – when you've been cheated yet again out of 25 miles because you and dispatch disagree on the distance between Toronto and Chicago, or when the carrier tells you the "industry standard" is to give away two hours of your time at every stop, it's hard to find any good in that.

But you know what? I get several calls a month from carriers, too, asking if I know any good owner/ops.

So on the one hand I have all these good owner/ops looking for good carriers, and on the other, I have good carriers asking if I know of any good owner/ops. Maybe I should give up on OBAC and just start a referral service.

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. So if I recommended that carrier to you, there's a good chance you wouldn't like it either. Or you might love it. And that's just the point here.

While there are some genuinely rotten carriers out there who thrive on exploiting owner/ops, slashing rates because they can hire cheap labour, and taking every advantage of the less-than-savvy drivers, I believe they're fewer in number than many might think.

All that to say I'm not so sure you can define a good or bad carrier (or a good or bad owner/op 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.

For example, take the almost-too-good-to-be-true carrier I wrote about last month (see Seven Habits of Successful Owner-Operators, who since then, by the way, has paid out more than $400,000 in bonuses to its employees and lease-operators and put an enhanced benefits package in place – all on top of a 45% increase in take-home pay for owner/ops in the past year.

The general manager of Coastal Pacific Xpress (CPX), Jim Mickey, of Surrey, B.C. tells me that while his company is doing all it can to be the best place possible for drivers and owner/ops to hang their hats, not everyone does well in that particular environment.

"The money is only part of it," he told me a few weeks ago. "The atmosphere around the terminal, expectations of home time, relationships with customers, the driving environment, and even the company's approach to safety and compliance are all 'make or break' items in the driver's relationship with the company."

So, 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 to be honest and realistic. A business relationship 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 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 a profit?

Then, you're ready to do some "pre-need" planning before you start making those calls on Tuesday morning. 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.

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 – after all, you're sinking a lot into a business relationship and you want it to last. And like any good marriage, you have to really know your partner before you get hitched.

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