



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

When will the industry appreciate the value of its older workers?

Maybe I just notice these things more because I'm of a certain age, but it seems that every time I open a newspaper or turn on the radio these days one analyst or another is talking about the aging workforce and making dire predictions about growing labour shortages.

And I don't mean the ubiquitous "driver shortage" trucking has been facing for ages, we're talking about alarming shortages in almost every sector of the economy, from unskilled labour through to highly paid professionals, as the population of the industrialized world grows older.

One study conducted recently by the American Association of Retired People (AARP) projected that in a mere eight years, close to 40% of the population in G7 nations will be over 50 years old. At the same time, the percentage of the labour force that falls into the traditional working age group – 15 to 49 years – will drop to 45%. The situation in Canada, which has the largest baby boom population in the Western hemisphere, is even more critical; there are now more Canadians over the age of 60 than under the age of five, and that is not expected to change anytime soon.

So what to do?

According to our federal department of Human Resources and Social Development (HRSDC), an increased presence of older Canadians in the workforce is key to the country's future prosperity, or as they put it, "optimizing older worker participation is the best means to offset labour market declines."

Government takes this pretty seriously, Prime Minister Stephen Harper tells us. His government has set up an Expert Panel on Older Workers to look at

ways of giving older workers the option of staying in the workforce longer. And Harper is warning the private sector that it, too, must step up to the plate and do more if it wants to combat the labour crunch by retaining older workers.

So, suddenly everyone is scrambling to persuade skilled older workers to stay on the job a little bit longer. Experts are popping up everywhere with strategies and advice on how to stop the gray-drain and make it easier for workers to stay in the workforce.

All of which leaves me wondering if the trucking industry has heard about this yet?

Sure, we fret about the driver shortage, but I don't see much from trucking by way of meaningful incentives to retain older, experienced drivers.

We're so focused on developing strategies to get bright, younger workers into the industry that we overlook the golden resource of seasoned veterans.

If there is indeed concern about the future labour supply, why do I hear of highly qualified and experienced drivers, who have been out of the industry for a year or two and want to get back in, being told they'll have to re-qualify by taking an entry-level driver's course to satisfy the insurance company? I hear, too, about carriers who will take these drivers on, but at a rookie rate of 25 or 28 cents a mile or something similarly insulting. That's not a meaningful incentive by any stretch of the imagination.

Sadly, ours is not an industry that acknowledges the value of experience in real terms. A truck driver can have decades of experience on the road, millions of accident-free miles, an accumulation of additional qualifications, and yet expect no more com-



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pensation or recognition than someone who's been on the job for only a few months. I'm a strong advocate for equal opportunity and fairness in the workplace, but come on!

It's little wonder that, every day, I hear from seasoned 20-, 30-, 40-year veterans who have simply "had it" and are hanging up their keys. In some cases, it's blatant age discrimination – like the ludicrous mandatory road test in Ontario triggered solely by turning 65. In other cases, it's a build-up of years of bad custom and practice: lack of flexibility, tolerance by carriers of excessive shipper demands, and of course the inexorable layering on of more and more restrictive regulations. All that chips away at driver morale at any age, but the willingness to put up with it decreases as we creep up in years.

I'd like to know when trucking is going to finally put two and two together.

With the cost of training an entry-level driver at something like \$10,000, you'd think folks in the industry could do the math and come up with less expensive ways to motivate and retain skilled older drivers, like offering flexible work shifts, more generous pay packages, making adjustments for minor disabilities, and refusing flat out the unreasonable demands shippers place on drivers.

Most industries have already figured it out – keeping capable, seasoned workers on the job is good for productivity and tremendously cost-effective. As usual, we're behind the curve. We're now competing with other sectors that have already begun fine-tuning their operations to attract older workers. Like they say in trucking, we're a day late and a dollar short.