



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Show them the money

Why a funding fix for students is needed

Check any list of trucking issues going back several decades and "driver shortage" will be there.

What you won't find though, is a shortage of opinions about how to define it, what's causing it, and how to fix it.

There's even debate about whether it's good or bad.

According to many fleet bosses surveyed by the American Transportation Research Institute (ATRI), trucking is in a crisis situation, facing a shortage of unprecedented proportions that will have catastrophic results.

Others, like Toronto-based Vitran's president and CEO Rick Gaetz, have a more positive outlook.

Speaking at last fall's meeting of the Ontario Trucking Association, Gaetz predicted the shortage could prove a vital aid in helping trucking companies improve their profitability and find a way to pay their drivers better.

Whether a blessing or curse, there's no denying that trucking, like every other sector of the economy, is facing shortages of qualified workers as the population of the industrialized world grows older, and peoples' attitudes and expectations towards jobs and work change.

Shortages of qualified workers are already showing up in a variety of industries, including trucking.

While we've come a long way in identifying some of the challenges of attracting people to a driving career, many companies just aren't there yet with the kind of things that are going to get people excited about a job in trucking: a safe workplace, a decent wage, a healthy lifestyle and good life/work balance.

Others, happily, are.

When I need a dose of healthy optimism and a reminder that there are, in fact, excellent employment opportunities, with quality employers, for qualified drivers, I call up my friend Andy Roberts, owner and president of Castlegar, B.C.-based Mountain Transport Institute.

Andy has no shortage of interest from people considering a career in trucking, nor does he have a shortage of inquiries from carriers looking for MTI graduates.

So what's the problem? It's all about the money.

Proper training that meets established standards and results in skill sets that allow individuals to get jobs right out of school is critical, but good training from a school such as MTI is expensive.

Andy is currently running classes of four students – in the past it was eight to 10 per class – not because people aren't interested, but because they can't access funding to take the program.

That fact is that potential students – including many unemployed or under-employed people who want to retrain for trucking jobs – simply can't get enough money together to pay for tuition, books, transportation, and accommodations, and they'll find precious little if they go looking for help.

Even MTI students who learn to drive the toughest, steepest mountain grades in the country on B.C.'s Hwy. 3 would be intimidated trying to negotiate CanLearn, the federal government's mind-boggling Web site that supposedly tells you everything you need to know about post-secondary education funding.

But you can troll the site for hours (www.canlearn.ca) and still not get a straight answer to the question, does truck driver training qualify for any financial assistance?

You have to look long and hard for a brief mention of Skills Development, the Employment Insurance-based program that is the primary source of funding for driver training – available only to people who have lost their job and are eligible for EI support.

But if you're unemployed, or are working but want to change jobs, or perhaps interested in trucking as a second career?

It depends. The feds provide some funding to provinces under a series of bilateral labour market agreement for programs and services for workers who are not eligible under EI, so if you happen to be in the right place, at the right time, and have the appropriate lack of skills, you might be eligible for a few bucks.

But it won't likely get you anywhere near a school that gives you the kind of training that will land a satisfying job with carriers like those, say,

Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director



that come looking for MTI graduates.

Then there's the Canada Student Loan Program that provides loans and grants to students who demonstrate financial need – if they've first applied for a provincial/territorial student loan. The problem is that current student loan programs, both federal and provincial, are set up for relatively low-cost and long-term college or university style programs and don't allow for loans that fund shorter, more expensive programs such as professional driver training.

Again, it's hit or miss, depending where you go to school.

My friend Andy is a strong believer that a viable student loan program is a win-win situation for all involved: students could access training that allows them to be employable, carriers could fill their empty seats with qualified professional drivers, the government would get the money back to reuse for the next student, the schools would get motivated students, and we all win with safer roads.

That's why he's behind a "call to action" for the B.C. government to create a new student loan program so anyone who chooses can access money for training to improve their personal situation and become a more effective and productive individual.

The New Student Loan Program Web site (<http://nslp.inthekoots.com>) is worth a visit.

It provides a wealth of background information on both the current and proposed student loan funding regimes, which, although it's B.C.-focused, could be a model for other Canadian provinces.

A higher level of professionalism, starting with excellent training, will justify the higher pay and lifestyle benefits that are needed to attract – and keep – first-rate drivers.

It's clear we need to explore different and creative funding arrangements, and a revamped, trucking-friendly student loan program might be a worthwhile investment.