



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

My 2014 wish list

It happens every year about this time. With the flip of a calendar page, we're into a brand new year. Like many folks, I try to remain optimistic, and look forward with hope and resolution to a year that's better than the one before. Some industry analysts say the second half of 2014 should bring the economic turnaround we've been hoping for, others say we're due for another recession. Apparently, this is all part of the so-called "new normal" for trucking: slower and steadier economic growth, greater emphasis on cost reduction, demand for greater productivity, and a continued emphasis on safety.

Really, the new normal doesn't sound so bad to me, as long as the system is prepared to make the necessary adjustments. Sadly, much of trucking is holding out, waiting for the old normal to return. Rather than hold our breath till we turn blue, here's what I wish would happen as we ease – rather than kick and scream – our way into the new normal.

Constructive dialogue between shippers and carriers: Through improvements in productivity and efficiency, trucking has always been able to lower the cost of transportation. But really, that cupboard is bare now; there's nothing left to give up. Shippers don't seem to get this, so carriers need to do a better job of convincing them.

Equipment costs are skyrocketing and any fuel economy gains that could accrue from the new fuel economy regs have already been spent. Drivers' wages are pathetic, and there are signs of an exodus on top of the difficulty in drafting new drivers. Shippers need to understand that low rates beget lower wages, and we're already dangerously close to the red line here.

I wish carriers would learn to say no, and shippers would learn the real cost of transportation.

Restore common sense to our regulatory environment: Safety remains a top priority for most drivers, but some of the rules we have now, and

many we're likely to see in the coming years, are simply over the top. Trucking can't do its job with one foot nailed to the floor. The single most requested change to HoS, for example, is flexibility, and that seems to be my most impossible wish. The new US HoS regs, mandated electronic logging devices, GHG rules, medical requirements, and more, are all pointing to vastly restricted productivity. At what point will drivers just toss in the towel and seek work in some other sector?

Action on CCMTA's Addressing Human Factors in the Motor Carrier Industry in Canada report: I'll bet most of you have never even heard of this. The study took three years to complete, and a report was released to government members of CCMTA in 2011. The research resulted in 44 action items to address fatigue, distraction, and risky driving, and was supposed to be the starting point to encourage new discussion among stakeholders. The report acknowledges that human errors are the main causes for crashes, but observes that things like inattention, distraction, and decision errors are not violations of laws and regulations per se, so regulations and enforcement alone won't produce safer drivers. Regulators don't like being told that HoS are imperfect and insufficient, and need to be part of a more comprehensive fatigue management strategy, which must include adequate rest areas.

And they are also loathe to look at the inter-relationship between risk-taking and health-risk and the importance of promoting healthy lifestyle programs and encouraging adoption of a health enhancing lifestyle to decrease risky driver behaviours. In my opinion, this report could be a template to repair a lot of what's wrong with the driver end of the equation, including training, wages, fatigue management, and more.

Meaningful change to recruiting and retention programs: In 2012, the CTA's Blue Ribbon Task Force on the Driver Shortage released an eye-



Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director

opening report, which is a comprehensive and honest attempt by the industry to tackle questions surrounding the driver shortage.

Along with frank admissions about mistakes trucking has made in the past, it contained some constructive proposals to improve the situation. Regrettably, that's about as far as it has gone. Not much will change until shippers wake up (see my first wish). Wages won't rise until rates rise. Labour costs are a business input, just like equipment and fuel. Industry recoups other costs, to a greater or lesser extent: why not wages? As I said, the red line of driver tolerance is rapidly approaching, and meaningful increases are long overdue.

Incentives for improvement: As odd as it sounds, it's still easier in this business to make more money by breaking the rules than following them. Or another way of putting it, even if one does the right thing, it often comes with a cost rather than a reward.

Things as seemingly simple as fuel incentives for drivers who save their companies the big bucks, and an HoS regimen that encourages compliance rather than the opposite, would get people thinking about how to do the job properly rather than dreaming up ways to cheat the system. I wish carriers would learn that reward works better than punishment – every time.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to wanting a safe workplace, a decent wage, and good work/life balance – what anyone wishes for in their job. And if some of my wishes came true, there just might be a lot more folks looking for a job behind the wheel of a truck.