



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Driver health and wellness: A fine balance

I recently checked my Canada Calling notes to see what we were talking about five years ago, the first year of our twice-weekly gig on the Dave Nemo show on SiriusXM radio. It won't come as any surprise that many hot topics on the list – costs, rates, regulatory burden, and the ubiquitous driver shortage – are still top-of-mind issues today.

But one thing that almost no one was talking about five years ago was driver wellness. Wellness programs certainly weren't on the list of enticements carriers offered in recruiting ads, and when they talked about fitness, it was all about regulatory compliance.

Happily, that's changing. Many of the trucking magazines and radio shows feature regular columns and commentary on the importance of nutrition, exercise, proper rest, and physical PM. But in many cases, it's the drivers themselves who are stepping up to the plate (or away from it) and focusing on making their own health and well-being a priority.

It's possibly the biggest challenge drivers face out on the road, and there are still many thousands of drivers who haven't heard the wake-up call, which is why we never miss an opportunity to heighten awareness and point drivers toward sources of help and support.

Our driver wellness activities at Truck World in Toronto last spring were such a hit that we replayed them at Truxpo in Abbotsford in September. In both cases, we teamed up with the Canadian Diabetes Association (CDA) who put together remarkable crews of volunteers: nurses, dietitians, and pharmacists. They did blood sugar testing, checked blood pressure, introduced drivers to an abundance of practical health and wellness information, and dispensed great swag not only from the CDA, but from the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Prostate Cancer Canada, and the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation as well.

In Abbotsford, the absolute star in our booth was Life Clinic's HealthChek station that measures blood pressure, heart rate, weight, BMI, body fat, and blood oxygen. The kiosk was loaned to us by Coastal Pacific Xpress (CPx) of Surrey, BC, a trucking industry leader in developing wellness programs for its drivers and employees. CPx encourages drivers to use the kiosks to track their

vital statistics that can help them identify and deal with health problems.

The main message we're trying to bring to drivers with our wellness activities is that it really is possible to steer away from a long-haul lifestyle of poor food, weight gain, and deteriorating health. There's no denying that the sedentary life of an over-the-road driver is a litany of compromises in diet, nutrition, and exercise. Add stressors like heavy traffic, tight schedules, and fatigue, and it's not hard to believe the research that suggests the average lifespan of a professional truck driver is 61 years.

In addition to a driver's willpower and a resolve, though, a key factor in their success is a carrier that creates a supportive environment and invests in its drivers' health and well-being with comprehensive wellness programs.

By and large, I think trucking is slow to understand where health and wellness and good work-life balance fit in the bigger picture of a safe, viable industry with a productive and loyal workforce. Slowly, though, one company at a time, that picture is starting to change.

Take CPx for example, which has been honoured by the B.C. Medical Association with the Council on Health Promotion Award of Excellence for the company's wellness programs. The very cool HealthChek kiosks are just the tip of the iceberg. This company takes the health and wellness of its drivers and staff very seriously. Walking Club members track their steps with state-of-the-art pedometers and are rewarded for meeting their goals; healthy breakfasts and lunches are available for drivers at company terminals on Fridays. And there probably aren't too many terminals where bowls of fresh fruit and healthy snacks are part of the decor.

Another company that gets a thumbs-up from us for its commitment to improving the health of its employees is Erb Transport. The New Hamburg, Ont.-based company was recently awarded the gold award in Waterloo Region's Healthy Workplace Program.

Erb is a contender this year (along with Winnipeg's Bison Transport and four US compa-



Joanne
Ritchie:
OBAC
executive
director

nies) in the Truckload Carriers Association's second weight loss challenge. The North American Battle of Trucking's Weight Loss Showdown is a 10-week competition where teams made up of 12 drivers and staff from each company vie for some pretty serious prizes for both the individual and the company that achieves the greatest percentage of weight loss.

Companies make a considerable investment of time and resources to support their teams, which follow a healthy menu plan coupled with exercise, nutrition education, and lifestyle changes. As well, individuals receive personalized coaching and support throughout the program from Lindora Clinic, a professional weight management provider that oversees the program for TCA. And Erb is going that extra mile and ponying up part of the cost for drivers who aren't part of the "official" Team Erb but want to take up the challenge on their own.

Drivers benefit greatly from these programs, but companies that invest in employee wellness programs reap the benefits as well.

Workplace wellness programs are associated with less absenteeism, less prescription drug use, and lower short-term disability. Trucker wellness also goes hand-in-hand with fewer trucking accidents and lower turnover. Healthy drivers are more engaged with their job and more productive. They cope better with stress, have less downtime due to illness, and are ultimately happier and safer drivers. What's not to like about that?

More than ever, drivers are adding healthy lifestyle and good life-work balance to their list of "must-haves" in their job.

And the more savvy carriers are starting to get it; a supportive work environment for drivers who take wellness and quality of life issues seriously should indeed be part of their strategy for attracting people to the job. Maybe matching up like-minded drivers and carriers is the healthiest way to get driver shortage off the list.