



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

The path of least resistance

February saw the release of yet another report on Canada's driver shortage. This one, *Understanding the Truck Driver Supply and Demand Gap and Its Implications for the Canadian Economy*, is meant to "quantify driver supply requirements and the resulting pressure the for-hire trucking industry will face to attract new drivers."

The report, produced by the Conference Board of Canada, made some startling pronouncements: Canada could experience a shortage of 25,000 to 33,000 for-hire truck drivers by 2020, disrupting not only the trucking industry, but the Canadian economy and ultimately affecting the well-being of consumers as well.

To anyone even tangentially associated with trucking, this is certainly not news. The industry has been citing "driver shortage" as a critical issue for decades. So why would the Canadian Trucking Alliance, who funded the Conference Board of Canada study, spend the big bucks to reaffirm what we all know anyway?

The answer goes back to the CTA's Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF) report on the driver shortage in trucking which was released last spring. That report was the first sign that there may be a shift in industry thinking about exactly whose problem the driver shortage is and what can be done about it.

As a first step, the BRTF recommended that industry quantify the driver shortage and forecast its impact on the Canadian economy, hence the Conference Board study. There needed to be, they reasoned, solid research that provided up-to-date facts and a credible forecast of the driver shortage that could be used to educate the public, government, shippers – and industry itself – on the severity of the issue.

The study does do that. The quantitative work is all there – census and Labour Force Survey data, demographics, supply and demand forecasting – and it will make an impressive lobbying tool when the industry goes knocking on someone else's door looking for help.

But the study is also supposed to form the basis for an industry call to action, which is the heart and soul of the BRTF report, and this is where I see a worrisome gap. The qualitative findings of the Conference Board report – derived from a survey of trucking industry executives and shippers – highlight the disparity between what the BRTF clearly shows the industry must do, and what industry leaders are actually prepared to do.

The BRTF pulled no punches. It boiled the root causes of the driver shortage down to four things: driver demographics, driver compensation, driver quality of life, and driver qualifications. Furthermore, it put the onus squarely on industry itself to take meaningful action to show all stakeholders – including drivers – that they are serious about coming to grips with these issues. Take driver demographics, one of the four root causes for a driver shortage that the BRTF identified. We can't underestimate the role demographics plays in recruiting and retaining drivers. The challenges of competing with every other industry for workers from a shrinking labour pool, and the inability of trucking to attract younger workers, are very real.

The BRTF says straight out that carriers need to put a greater effort into recruiting drivers from domestic sources by looking beyond the traditional "boy off the farm" recruit to non-traditional sources, including women, aboriginal people, personnel leaving military service, and workers laid off from jobs in other sectors. They also acknowledge the inescapable fact that Canada needs immigration to grow its workforce over the long term.

Yet, for all its in-depth examination of demographics, the Conference Board report ignores the possibility of recruiting more people from the domestic workforce and goes directly to immigration. They reiterate what they've been told by industry leaders; there is an important role for government to play in developing licensing stan-



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dards that recognize truck driving as a skilled trade – for immigration purposes. Sadly, it glosses over the BRTF call to action for carriers to seek out a range of new recruiting pools and takes the path of least resistance, dropping the ball on someone else's doorstep.

The BRTF report also finally acknowledged something the industry has been ignoring for years: workers will always go where they think they can get the best mix of compensation, quality of life, and training, and trucking's persistent disregard of these concerns makes the other three root causes of a driver shortage pretty easy to figure out.

The BRTF is also adamant that despite everything else, it is the carriers themselves who are ultimately responsible for their businesses and for ensuring that they are able to recruit and retain the people they need to do the work.

But when you hear what some of those industry leaders told Conference Board researchers, you've got to wonder if they've even read the BRTF report. Wage increases for drivers would result in higher prices for customers, which would not be tolerated. Changing the way trucking is done to attract folks who don't want the lifestyle that goes along with unscheduled, long-haul truckload operations is too costly. Training is good, but only if government can figure out a way to subsidize it. That kind of Netherthal thinking drives me wild. The best we can hope for is that those carriers who are so resistant to shaking up the business model to suit the changing times and labour market preferences and realities aren't the same ones who will be taking the lead in developing an action plan to set recommendations of the BRTF in motion.