

# Best Practices for Improving Driver Retention for the Long Haul

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The global supply chain is in the midst of an unprecedented era of immediacy. Consumer expectations for acceptable delivery times are shrinking, and investors and logistics tech behemoths are committing huge budgets to ensure those expectations can be met with efficiency. Trucking has long been a critical element of the supply chain, and it's receiving increased attention as the world remains shuttered in the face of the pandemic.

At the heart of this nearly \$800 billion industry is the driver. More than 3.5 million people work as truck drivers in the United States, with 1.5 million of those working as company drivers for one of 124,320 employer businesses in the industry. From small, regional fleets of a few trucks to heavy-hitters with a large fleet, the competition is steep for companies seeking to attract and retain experienced drivers. Today, trucking companies must focus heavily on driver retention to remain competitive. This includes providing the benefits and experience that truck drivers need to feel secure and appreciated.

## Identifying the problems

In order to improve retention, fleet owners must first understand the factors that cause drivers to move on from their roles. First and foremost, it comes down to pay. The average driver in the United States today is pulling in approximately \$61,000 per year, and it's often the secure and attractive salary that keeps drivers on the road, despite time away from loved ones and long working hours. For owner-operators or fleets, the question of

rate is binary; it's either high enough, or it's simply too low. Most carriers know that offering an attractive rate is essential, but competitive pay means more than a dollar amount.

Their handling of issues and barriers to retention, like delayed paychecks, can make or break success for owner-operators and fleets. In the modern trucking industry, no driver has time to travel long distances to pick up a check or track down an overdue payment. Companies that offer direct deposit, digital payment updates and other more accessible compensation tools stand a far better chance of maintaining drivers' loyalty.

Another factor to consider is the attractiveness of the loads a carrier can maintain in its broker relationships. Drivers want to know that the loads they're hauling will meet their preferences for destinations, lanes and load types. For trucking companies, this is where maintaining a diverse set of customers and shippers becomes critical; it ensures a level of consistency for drivers beyond the steady stream of opportunities found at most companies during peak season.

Fleet owners should be deliberate and strategic about the shippers and customers they choose to partner with and avoid over-diversifying. Different load types require specific certifications and regulatory procedures. Before taking on a restricted load type, such as hazmat, consider whether your company has enough drivers to meet that demand. Determine whether you are targeting general freight, or specific markets, and then align your load availability with drivers' expectations.

When drivers are planning their days, access to the best loads, lanes and port-to-city routes can help trucking companies entice and motivate their drivers. Ultimately, if the compensation is attractive enough, drivers who can reliably access their most favored loads and routes will be more likely to stay with a company for several years.

## **Taking immediate action**

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In the immediate term, fleet owners can improve retention by emphasizing two key areas of improvement -- interpersonal interactions and operational support.

Building strong relationships between company and driver yields better retention and improves satisfaction. Companies seeking to boost retention should assess their points of contact with drivers, using the same critical eye with which one might assess customer service.

When drivers encounter an issue at the port, are they able to reach a representative quickly? If there's a problem at the terminal, does the driver expect to be placed on hold awaiting assistance? Are representatives effective and helpful?

When issues arise, as inevitably they do, it's important that drivers can quickly access support onsite to prevent delays. Efficient problem resolution benefits the driver and the company alike and can make drivers feel more supported.

In terms of short-term operational improvements, it's also important to have the right technology in place to support driver-facing operations in the day-to-day. Electronic payment management can make it easy for drivers to be compensated, and mobile communication can improve access to loads and track last-minute route changes. By providing drivers with a unified source of payment, load and policy information, companies can bypass the complicating factors that might otherwise frustrate a driver.

Additionally, contactless interactions have driven efficiencies industry-wide in recent months, and companies should consider drivers' preferences for contacting support. While email might be the way of the world for many professionals, a driver on the road is likely to prefer the convenience of a phone call. When they're off the clock or taking a rest stop, an email, mobile app or text message option might be preferable. The quality of the technology is also paramount; trucking is a complex industry, and companies should thoroughly vet any apps or software platforms to avoid presenting drivers with an unwelcome or underdeveloped resource.

## **Staying in it for the long haul**

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To improve retention in the long term, fleet owners should pay equal attention to establishing a sense of community among drivers and laying the groundwork for competitive success.

Truck driving is an inherently lonely job, characterized by long hours on the road and time away from family. To ease the effects of hours spent alone in the cab, companies should seek to foster a company culture that enables drivers to feel connected to their dispatchers and to one another. Consider implementing initiatives like driver appreciation events or in-person town halls to create opportunities for drivers to interact face-to-face.

While the pandemic continues to restrict in-person activities, trucking companies should reach out to drivers personally to discuss their feedback and establish active social networks to help drivers and their company colleagues to remain in touch outside of work. Referrals are great for the company, but they're equally important for growing the community within it; creating a positive experience is a critical element in attracting driver-to-driver referrals and maintaining a sustainable community within your organization.

When drivers feel confident that they can expect to be paid on time, with easy, consistent access to loads and a community of other drivers to connect with, retention can improve exponentially. For companies, the key to success lies in prioritizing the driver experience.