

Synthesis of Long-Haul Truck Driver Labor Market Desires and Dysfunctions

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Problem Identification

Consistent with much of the trucking industry, Christenson Transportation struggles to keep a steady roster of truck drivers. While recruiting new drivers is an essential aspect of the business, this study aimed to discover the turnover-producing incongruences between truck driver desire and the nature of their careers. In addition, a key objective was to identify and recommend pragmatic changes in policy, practice, and procedure to increase retention.

Knowledge Deficiencies

The problem-based learning approach was adopted to provide a systematic research framework to uncover the nuances of the complex labor economics issue. A review of the problem indicated truck driver dissatisfaction and desire primarily exist in three core domains: pay, lifestyle/home time, and respect (Randall-Reilly, 2020). While these primary domains were consistently represented in existing industry surveys, the underlying causal dysfunctions were not represented and needed further investigation.

Literature Review

Investigating the three domains of driver job dissatisfaction and driver desire was a multi-disciplinary endeavor. Psychologically and sociologically, loneliness, lackluster social relationships, and poor mental health have been cited as issues faced by long-haul truck drivers (Hege et al., 2016; Kahaner, 2016). Strikingly, the issue of pay was well represented in the literature on truck driver desire for respect in cases where drivers do not feel as though they are fairly compensated for their work (Gordon et al., 2018). In addition to being tied to respect, the pay issue is quite complex. Treating the desire for more pay with increased compensation seems to be counterproductive. This is evidenced by drivers who received pay increases and decided to drive less and spend more time at home (Isidore, 2021). While the literature review indicated some intermingling of the desire domains, the root causes of issues were still left unaddressed. This knowledge deficiency exhibited the need to conduct original research to discover the nuances of the factors contributing to driver dissatisfaction and turnover intention.

Research & Analysis

Twelve long-haul truck drivers were selected from the driver population at Christenson Transportation for semi-structured interviews. With the assistance of driver-facing staff, participants who had demonstrated cooperative characteristics, adequate communication skills, and the ability for deep thought were purposefully selected. Thirty-three pre-selected questions or prompts involving the desire domains of pay, home time, and respect were posed to each participant. These prompts were followed by Socratic dialogue to encourage genuine and critically thought-out responses from participants (Wortel & Verweij, 2008). Following interviews, a six-phase thematic analysis was utilized to organize the findings into standard codes and themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). The key themes identified were omni-personal respect, financial tension, downtime desires, and an ailing workplace.

Omni-personal respect includes interpersonal and intrapersonal respect. Truck drivers dealing with interpersonal disrespect were well represented in the existing literature; however, the lack of intrapersonal respect was a novel finding. Interviewees' claims and supporting literature illuminated this dysfunction:

- 58% of interviewees reported a lack of self-esteem or self-respect.
- Lack of intrapersonal respect is an important predictor of depression (Sharma & Agarwala, 2014).
- 66% of participants reported poor coping skills when faced with disrespect.
- Individuals suffering from depression perceive a lack of interpersonal respect and commonly lack the ability to positively handle disrespect (Chand, 2018; Wolff & Agree, 2004).
- 75% of study participants reported mental health concerns.

Financial tension leading to the desire for more pay is hallmarked by poor financial management, the economic burden of home time, and the desire for recognition. First, 25% of participants discussed compulsive spending in conjunction with a lack of self-esteem, and nearly 50% of drivers attributed the desire for more pay to financial stress. It is important to note compulsive spending and depression are common psychiatric comorbidities (Harnish et al., 2021). Secondly, two-thirds of drivers described a need for a pay structure that meaningfully acknowledges their experience and dedication. Lastly, 75% of interviewees described the financial inability to go home, which results in strained relationships, increased stress and fatigue on the road, and prolonged loneliness.

Research participants associated the desire for downtime with a few issues: lack of community, a need for family time, and time for relaxation. The discussions on the lack of community centered around the loss of the truck driver community during the 1990s. Drivers described this loss of community as a loss of stress-relieving bonds. Participants unanimously declared the need for time with family and meaningful connections. Finally, drivers described their desire for relaxation time as a physical and mental need to be away from their truck. A remarkable finding of this study came from several research participants who testified home time with family was of utmost importance, yet subsequently described a contradictory need to unwind in solitude for up to 48 hours when arriving home.

The ailing workforce theme illustrates multi-faceted unhealthiness as described by research participants. While interviewees frequently cited poor physical health due to poor diet and lack of exercise opportunities, the focus of many drivers centered on fatigue, stress, and poor sleep hygiene. The descriptions of symptoms from the participants echoed existing research on untethered circadian rhythms, poor metabolic health, cardiovascular decline, and malfunctioning endocrine systems (Boyce, 2016; Hege et al., 2016). Many drivers described their poor physical health as closely associated with declining mental health conditions, including poor intrapersonal respect. An optimistic finding related to this theme involved drivers who reported self-discovered remedies for mental health struggles. They described therapies such as practicing gratitude, having a mindful presence, and having little to no emotional concern for the past or future.

Recommended Solutions

In response to the research findings, three pragmatic, reasonable, and financially feasible solutions were suggested to improve driver retention by treating dysfunctions substantiated by multi-disciplinary research and addressing desires described by research participants. First, a better-sleep initiative was suggested to establish healthy sleeping environments for drivers by providing state-of-the-art truck mattresses and sensory deprivation and manipulation technology, such as sleep masks and white noise machines. This solution treats the dysfunctions related to fatigue, stress, and untethered circadian rhythms. Given the desire for respect seems to have substantial roots in several psychiatric comorbidities, which are exacerbated by poor sleep, this solution also aims to enhance driver resiliency and perception regarding interpersonal disrespect. Second, it was recommended to employ a driver advocate to serve as an emotional outlet and sense of community for drivers. This solution was recommended due to the conveyed

lack of community and the desire for a more cooperative relationship with the company. Third, a virtue-based cultural improvement initiative was recommended to develop the ability of driver-facing office workers to be empathetic, patient, and positively responsive to drivers. This solution is solely based on the traits of the virtuous leader, as described by Brooker and Boyce (2017). Driven by the executive group, these traits will form a foundation of conduct and a common language to be shared by the entire office staff. Accordingly, these attributes are expected to be discussed, debated, and contemplated. All three solutions were discussed with trucking company executives and other industry experts to ensure they were operationally practical, financially feasible, and logistically reasonable to implement.

Change Management

The virtue-based cultural improvement initiative, which has already been implemented at the executive level of the organization, will be expanded to the rest of the organization by the end of 2022. The success of this solution will be evaluated semi-annually via employee surveys and reviews. The driver advocate position within the company is to be implemented by the end of 2022 as well. This solution's efficacy will be evaluated regularly by developing an assessment tool and obtaining feedback from drivers on their interaction with the driver advocate. Finally, the better-sleep initiative will involve a slower roll-out due to the cost of the project, which is estimated to be \$748 per driver. This solution will begin with a six-month controlled trial of state-of-the-art mattresses and additional sleep technology. Feedback concerning mental and physical fitness will be solicited as well as information on job satisfaction. These statistics will be used to inform long-term decisions concerning this solution.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to discover the underlying desires and dysfunctions resulting in unacceptable turnover rates among long-haul truck drivers in the freight and logistics industry, specifically at Christenson Transportation. The existing literature pointed toward three domains of job dissatisfaction: pay, home-time/lifestyle, and respect. The underlying concepts within those domains had been previously unexplored. The qualitative research design of this study allowed the participants, long-haul truck drivers, to thoroughly contemplate and explain the complexity of their plight in their own terms. The testimony from the drivers was triangulated with existing scholarly literature across many fields, including various branches of healthcare, social science, and behavioral science. In addition, the drivers' testimony was compared to existing trade and industry-specific publications. As a result, this study produced novel findings that were well-articulated by participants and backed by existing research. Consequently, comprehensive solutions were developed to fulfill truck driver desire and mitigate dysfunctions, ultimately causing job dissatisfaction. If effective, these solutions will positively impact an entire industry struggling to retain a labor force and, most importantly, improve the quality of life of long-haul truck drivers.

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