

Mentoring the (Professional) Younger Driver

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As older experienced drivers retire the trucking industry has discovered it's in a bind finding that it doesn't have enough qualified (hopefully *safe*) drivers to fill its needs. The reasons for this dilemma exist on several levels, the most common of which relate to career opportunities, long hours, time away from home and family, pay, benefits, the difficult task of driving a commercial vehicle and the skills necessary for the job, the extensive federal motor carrier regulations with which a driver must be familiar, and licensing requirements, to mention just a few.

Don't think we are alone, however – every form of transportation is facing a similar dilemma: how to replace their retiring *experienced* operators.

So, with this in mind, who today wants to be a truck driver? One has to ask: as a career or just as a job to get a paycheck? It's a thorny problem that involves all of the above. Making a difficult job *attractive* is a challenge in itself. But, let's focus on finding safe drivers and promoting safe driving.

As our current experienced drivers retire, where are we going to find safe drivers to replace them? The answer lies in our schools, for as it is with learning how to run, you have to learn to walk first; driving is no different. There are plenty of good schools around that teach persons how to be a safe truck driver, and in New England several of high caliber. But, in order to be a safe truck driver a person needs first to be a good and

safe driver of a much smaller motor vehicle. If we want safe drivers for our industry, we must work to encourage and identify safe drivers of automobiles.

Sixty years ago, Michigan became the first state to mandate driver education (1955). This was 27 years *after* the publication of the Uniform Traffic Code that set forth motor vehicle laws. Today when a person gets their driver's license, they are expected to be knowledgeable of the traffic laws; well, they aren't. Generally, a person who has reached the legal age limit for getting a license really ***really*** wants to get their license, so they study the driver's manual in order to pass their test. In short, "Teach me what I have to know to pass the exam." Is there some doubt why those aged between 15 and 25 account for the highest number of traffic fatalities in the United States?

Yet, people think they know the basics, that is, stop at a stop sign, yield at a yield sign; red means stop, green means go(!), yellow means...well, what *does* it mean? People barely know how to parallel park let alone know the laws or how to fill their windshield washer reservoir. But, even if a person *does* know the laws...do they comply with them? Errant behavior becomes acquired behavior after they have obtained their license.

More than a decade ago the high rate of young adult motor vehicle fatalities was so high states began examining why they were being killed on their roads. What they found was that it was the manner in which they were being taught was part of the problem, not that driver's education was inadequate, and greater restrictions had to be imposed on young novice drivers.

Many states, New Hampshire included, required that a person mentoring (i.e., teaching) another person to drive had to be at least 18 years of age. When studies determined that it was the 18-year-olds who were teaching the 15-year-olds how to drive, alarm bells began to ring. Parents used to take their children out and teach their kids, but these novices were more susceptible to the influences of their slightly older brothers, sisters or friends. So, consider that a poor driver who teaches another driver is more likely to pass along poor driving advice and direction, and this is what the studies identified as a serious problem. The barely older, but still less experienced, driver was teaching the driver with no experience whatsoever and was, in effect, a bad influence because of their age, lack of responsibility, and skill.

The result was the “graduated license.” This type of license is issued with stricter limitations on a person’s ability to drive. In New Hampshire, the age requirement was adjusted upward (to age 25!) in the attempt to have the person giving instruction be endowed with more maturity and responsibility, as well as better skills and experience.

In essence, what is driver education all about? By the time a person is 15 years old, in today’s world they already have been driving for 14 of those years in some manner or form, beginning with placing a child behind a steering wheel in a child seat, at a playground, or at a grocery store. That child soon graduates to an ATV, snowmobile, and computer-generated games driving a vehicle (albeit on a screen) at high speed. Observing one’s parents and relatives is also part of this educational process. By the

time a young person gets their license, they already know the details of a vehicle's operation (i.e., acceleration, turning, etc., but not necessarily *stopping*), but their attitudes about vehicle operation are also being formed. Those *attitudes* form the foundation for motor vehicle law compliance. Driver education attempts to address both.

We are products of what we have learned. In short, how we drive today is a result of what influences we have encountered. Think about what your future driver has observed in today's world. By the time a person gets a license, they have seen a lot of poor driving habits. Thus, if we as an industry are to find and encourage safe drivers, we have to play a greater role in driver education...while making driving a truck attractive as a career choice.

Consider that the time we spend teaching young drivers in driver education classes and on the road practicing with an adult does not necessarily prepare a young driver for today's harried and hazardous traffic environment.

Driving can be dangerous. Right now all drivers face serious highway safety threats whenever they go out to drive. Aside from distracted driving (texting and cellphone use behind the wheel has been called a "national epidemic") we have a growing prescription drug and illegal drug use problem, not to mention the legalization of marijuana use. Impaired driving is no longer restricted to alcohol. When you consider these facts you come to the conclusion that this is not just a trucking industry problem.

The new driver you hire may need additional training in more than how to make a left or right turn. You may have to change their attitudes.

Think about where your company will find its future drivers. New Hampshire's *Teens & Trucks* program is one way to reach younger drivers; companies should become more engaged with their local school systems and driver education courses by participating in this program. NHMTA fully supports *Teens & Trucks* along with the invaluable support of the New Hampshire Department of Safety, State Police Commercial Vehicle Unit, the New Hampshire Professional Drivers Association, Con-Way Freight, Fed Ex Express, Resource Management Industries, Ross Express, Wal-Mart, White Mountain Community College, and YRC. Furthermore, companies have to engage their own drivers by enforcing safe driving standards out on the roads so that the truck driver is a role model for others.

When a young driver comes to your company as a new employee, he or she already possesses a set of skills that have been shaped by a variety of influences. But, you still have to take the time to train or mentor that employee and instill a safety ethic. On-the-job training is often the most valuable form and while the driver may have paid the fees and passed the test to obtain a license, you still need a safe and responsible driver who is committed to safety and driving with due regard for the safety of others on the road.

Be the mentor...get involved...craft the driver you want driving for and representing your company.