



# Back to school

**Continuing education can be an important component of a truck driver's career, writes Harry Rudolfs.**

**TORONTO, Ont.** – Ask any safety manager and they'll tell you a well-trained driver is a safe driver. The problem is getting policy and safety updates to a fleet that might be spread out across North America.

Satellite messaging can convey short missives, and memos attached to pay slips probably get read before they're tossed. But there's nothing like a live meeting to impart information directly to drivers.

Bill Kalbhenn, general safety manager of Highland Transport holds bi-weekly safety meetings at the company's Markham, Ont. terminal. Highland's Ontario drivers pass through this terminal at one time or other, and he expects company drivers and owner/operators to attend at least two meetings per year.

"We'll cover off things like accident reporting, air brakes, and speed/space management," says Kalbhenn. "The meetings are usually 45 minutes to an hour long and followed by some discussion afterwards."

As an incentive, drivers who attend the meetings are eligible for a prize draw (tickets to a Caribbean cruise this year), and he'll usually include a safety meeting before the annual banquet. According to Kalbhenn, Highland's safety program is always undergoing development and refinement.

"It's critical to have a safety program in place so everyone knows what the standards are," he says. "This has to include recruiting, maintenance and operations. It's not just a case of training drivers."

When Bob Smith, safety manager for Mackie Moving Systems, wants his 366 drivers to attend a meeting he has to book eight consecutive sessions.

"Because of the nature of our work, the only day we can get driv-

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Harry Rudolfs



ers to come in is Sunday," he says. Drivers are paid for the training and a cash bonus is awarded yearly to drivers without CVOR infractions or preventable accidents.

"You've got to talk to them in their own language," says Smith. "This is where it's costing us money and you've got to help us with the program."

Bison Transport, with its Tatonka driver training program might be considered an industry leader when it comes to a multi-pronged approach to learning. Tatonka's blended seminars include classroom instruction, simulator training and interactive online workshops.

"We totally believe in training and continuous development," says Garth Pitzel, director of safety and driver development for Bison. "We're looking at developing some further online courses drivers can take at the terminals kicking off at the beginning of next year."

Bison's driver-specific e-learning courses include sessions on time/space management, decision driving, fuel management and extreme driving conditions.

"We're well aware that the driver development cycle has to start at orientation," says Pitzel. "After six

months we provide them with an evaluation of eight courses. After that they have to take at least two courses a year."

Larger fleets usually have some funds earmarked for driver education programs, but what about the smaller companies without the resources to deliver courses? The answer might lie with a third-party consultant like Carrier's Edge, a Markham-based firm that offers online training to fleets who can't afford to spend a lot of time or money developing programs.

The only tools required are a couple of computer terminals in the drivers' room.

"Web-based training is much more interactive with pictures, narration and fairly vigorous testing," according to company president Mark Murrell. "The advantage is that people can take as long as they need to."

Carrier's Edge offers training modules on dangerous goods, Customs clearance and Hours-of-Service among others, and these can be customized to suit a particular carrier's needs.

A full defensive driving course takes 1.5 to two hours to complete,

while the dangerous goods module usually can be done in 40 minutes. A trainer can then evaluate the test scores and work with

the driver on any areas that need attention.

"There's a perception that truck drivers can't use a computer, but the opposite is true – drivers like this," says Murrell.

The cab of a truck as a classroom has always intrigued me. Armed with a laptop and a WiFi Internet connection, today's trucker can assail the walls of academia. But it requires the initiative of the employer to set up a "continuing learning culture," one that starts on the day

of hire and carries through to retirement.

"With the colleges providing more courses online, and with more laptops and Internet connections available, I think you're going to see more drivers pursuing post-secondary education online," says Murrell.

"Other industries regularly have education assistance programs that reimburse employees for continuing education, and I think you'll see the progressive carriers starting to jump on that as well. Whether it's bonuses for different certifications, or working a deal where the carrier pays for a three-year diploma in exchange for a commitment that the driver will stick around and maintain a clean safety record during that time. With the apprenticeship program getting off the ground, the timing seems right, especially as a carrot for younger drivers, Aboriginals or new Canadians that may be considering entering the industry."

One carrier that is clearly on the education bandwagon is Sharp Transportation Systems of Cambridge, Ont.

"I used to drive myself years ago," says general manager Shawn Baird. "And I always liked the idea of learning as you're going down the road – this is possible now with existing technology."

Sharp Transportation has 48 drivers, both owner/ops and company drivers.

Its particular niche is hotel and office moves between Canada and the US. Since most of the American loaders it uses speak Spanish, Baird chose that language as an introductory course. He currently has two drivers testing out interactive Spanish courses and others waiting to get started. Baird thinks this is only the beginning.

He sees cab-side education as an enabling process for drivers, whether they want to get an MBA or study medieval poetry. He also envisages drivers taking courses on financial management and full-diploma courses from Conestoga College that his company is looking into funding.

"E-training is cheap and easy and it's a stimulus because the mind always likes to learn. We've never lost anybody by trying to make them better." □

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