

Why a unified approach is key to solving our skills shortage crisis



Above: In busy urban areas such as London business may only employ someone with experience and confident in their ability to manage a vehicle

Jacqueline O'Donovan FCILT discusses how the skills shortage within the waste and logistics sectors is increasing competition for good drivers, and what we can all do to solve the crisis before it is too late.

The phrase 'skills shortage' is bandied around a lot at the moment. It is in news stories, government speeches and trade body manifestos. It is an issue facing industries UK wide, from engineering to medicine and everything in between. In waste and logistics, we, too, are suffering from a deficit of fresh, new talent coming up the ranks. Despite a growing need for people to work in our sector and the thousands of people looking for jobs, it seems that the waste and logistics sector is not appealing. It either is not doing enough to attract new talent, or those who are interested in working with us do not have the qualifications needed to do the jobs.

The fact of the matter is that driving HGVs as a career has changed. Gone are the days when anyone with a licence could jump in a truck and take to the road, largely unchecked and unmonitored as his or her career progressed. Nowadays things are greatly improved. There are limits to how long a driver can work, with stricter rules in terms of the lorries themselves and, of course, a greater level of qualification needed by drivers before they can climb into the cab. This is certainly a step in the right direction towards making driving a recognised profession, but more must be done.

One of the key issues facing the industry is the lack of appeal around driving as a career. Traditionally, being a lorry driver was viewed as an unappealing job or a back-up should you prefer physical work to academic. Unfortunately, a lot of this stigma still exists today, although driving itself has changed significantly. The modern driver working for a responsible company can expect strong wages, good working conditions, well-maintained and technologically advanced lorries to operate, career progression opportunities and the chance to upskill and learn. Our biggest issue is that this is not communicated effectively enough and consequently the industry is suffering. Fewer young people see driving as a viable and attractive career path. This must change if we are to continue to thrive as an industry.

In addition to the lack of fresh talent, we have lost good drivers early due to the introduction of the Driver Certificate of Professional Competence (Driver CPC). With the course requiring financial and time investment by the drivers themselves, many good drivers with solid experience chose to take early retirement rather than spend the time and money getting an additional qualification that would only be used for a short length of time.

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SECTOR HIGHLIGHTS

Supply Chain

Freight Forwarding



Above: O'Donovan is already working hard to make the necessary changes to promote HGV driving as a career

Another hurdle the industry faces is the age to obtain an HGV licence not coinciding with education system. This means we are not able to recruit or engage with non-academic students after GCSE, as applicants must be 18 to obtain a licence. Therefore, in the two or three years after a person leaves school they will likely have chosen an apprenticeship or college course for a different career before being able to drive for a living. This reiterates the importance of the industry interacting with young people as soon as possible. If we do not make the effort to engage them early and demonstrate to them the opportunities available within our industry, we will lose them to something else and we simply cannot afford to do this.

In addition to age restrictions on gaining a licence, there is the added fact that newly qualified drivers need experience to be financially attractive to employers. This is because the insurance to cover them for work is either unavailable or more costly than if they had the relevant experience. This means even if we were to have thousands of people qualified immediately, it would be at least another two years before they could really impact the skills shortage. This also begs the question, where would this experience come from? It is a Catch 22 scenario.

This two-year period during which companies would find it hard to insure new drivers could also be responsible for losing us lots of potential new HGV drivers to stiff competition, even from within logistics and retail – for example, a self-employed, smaller commercial vehicle driver can fairly easily get work within retail, particularly now that big names are offering same-day or next-day delivery. This is creating a demand for drivers that hit the road immediately, work flexible hours and still earn a decent

wage. This situation makes it hard for HGV operators to compete and drivers that could potentially rectify the deficit are lost to another option.

Another concern, particularly for SMEs, is the risk of handing over the keys to £100,000-worth of HGV. A business will only do this with someone who has real road experience and in whose ability to manage such a vehicle they have complete confidence. This is particularly important in busy urban areas, such as London, where HGV safety is of paramount importance.

It is clear that as an industry we have a fair few hurdles that must be overcome if we are to continue to thrive. We believe the only way that we can do this is if the industry acts as a whole and collaborates on finding a solution.

At O'Donovan, we are already working extremely hard to make the necessary changes to promote HGV driving as a legitimate lifetime career. We value drivers as one of the most important elements to running our successful business and have therefore invested heavily in making our company as attractive an employer as possible. We give all of our drivers the opportunity to upskill and progress in their careers, we pay above the average wages and offer state-of-the-art vehicles for them to drive. We also work hard to ensure our team feel valued and included in business change and, as such, we have an extremely low staff turnover.

However, we are still up against it when it comes to recruiting new drivers, as the pool of talent simply is not there. This could, of course, lead some to say that the skills shortage is driving industry standards. If all employers are working this hard to improve their attractiveness to potential recruits this can only be a good thing, surely? However, if the number of recruits available continues to dwindle, these efforts will be largely in vain unless the industry as a whole works harder to ensure that these changes are promoted to a much, much wider audience.

The skills shortage within HGV driving is a very real and very immediate issue. The fact of the matter is that there are too many jobs available and not enough qualified drivers to fill them. As industries such as construction and demolition, in which we specialise, continue to flourish the need for drivers will only grow. The issue will only get worse if we do not act sooner rather than later.

A number of trade and professional organisations have already started taking steps in the right direction. Transport for London (TfL), the Road Haulage Association (RHA), CILT, and the Freight Transport Association (FTA) as examples have all spoken publicly about the need for us to improve the situation and have promoted their respective efforts in helping to do this. While this is, of course, extremely positive and a step in the right direction, a more joined-up approach is needed if we are to make real change. Likewise, although many companies are working hard to improve the conditions and opportunities available to HGV drivers there is simply no point in this approach if only a handful of companies are doing it. We must be unified in our approach and this goes for trade bodies, large outfits, SMEs such as O'Donovan and small owner-operators.

We have been discussing this issue for too long. There is no denying that the industry is already working hard to rectify the situation, trade bodies are talking about it publicly, the Government is aware of it and logistics companies are already working hard to improve their own operations. However, while steps are being made for us to climb the ladder collectively towards a solution, we are not climbing it quickly enough. The only real way to make a difference is if we work together; our trade bodies should unite, consult the industry and advise Government on the best action to take.

Collaboration is the key word here. It is the only way we will solve this issue. Ultimately, if we do not act together, we will suffer together and that is just not something we can afford to let happen after all the efforts we have made so far.

About the author

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