

READING EAGLE BUSINESS WEEKLY

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Courtesy of The Sage Corp. | Skip McClellan, a Sage Corp. instructor and CDL examiner for more than 15 years, inspects a tractor-trailer. "Expert instructors are a huge part of why Sage is successful," said company Vice President Chris Thropp.

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Demand for CDL drivers high, standards higher

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By Bill Warner

What is a CDL?

Anyone who drives a commercial motor vehicle in Pennsylvania is required to have a commercial driver's license, or CDL. Commercial vehicles include combination vehicles, such as a tractor and trailer; single trucks; vehicles designed to transport 16 or more passengers; school buses; and vehicles transporting hazardous materials.

There are three classes of CDL:

Class A: A combination vehicle (tractor-trailer) with a gross weight rating of 26,001 pounds or more, provided the gross vehicle weight rating of the vehicle being towed is in excess of 10,000 pounds.

Class B: Single vehicles with a gross weight rating of 26,001 pounds or more, or any such vehicle towing a vehicle not in excess of 10,000 pounds.

Class C: Single vehicles with a gross weight rating of less than 26,001 pounds if the vehicle is transporting hazardous materials requiring placarding; is designed to transport 16 or more passengers, including the driver; or is a school bus.

Tests:

Candidates must pass a knowledge test (70 questions for Class A, and 50 questions for Classes B and C), and a skills test in the class and type of vehicle they intend to drive. The skills test includes a pre-trip inspection, an off-the-road maneuver and a vehicle parking exercise.

CDL manuals are free and available from PennDOT.

For more information, visit www.dmv.pa.gov.

You wouldn't know it when driving on Interstate 78, Interstate 81, the Pennsylvania Turnpike or any major roadway where tractor-trailers are abundant.

Believe it or not, there is a shortage of truck drivers, locally and nationally.

"The trucking industry has been facing a shortage of drivers for quite a while," said Chris Thropp, vice president of Sage Corp., based in Camp Hill, Cumberland County, which operates 25 truck-driving schools nationwide. "This is always a topic of conversation. There's probably a variety of reasons for the demand."

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Thropp offered what he believes are two of the biggest reasons for the driver shortage.

"Baby boomers are retiring," he said. "People in their 50s and 60s are retiring."

"The lifestyle (of a driver) is definitely a factor," he continued. "Being a truck driver is hard work."

Phillip Gonzales, an education consultant with the commercial driver's license, or CDL, program at Berks Technical Institute, Wyomissing, echoed Thropp's assessment.

"The supply is not keeping up with the demand (for drivers)," Gonzales said. "I think that's a big part of it."

Industry has changed

Gonzales said the industry has changed considerably during the past 20 years. Trucking is one of the most heavily regulated industries.

For example, separate certifications are needed to drive a tanker, transport hazardous materials, haul double- or triple-trailers or carry passengers. Technology is evolving rapidly. Those two factors can intimidate older workers who are thinking about a truck-driving career.

"When you think of the population of truck drivers in the last 20 years," Gonzales said, "a lot of drivers were baby boomers coming into the business, and they didn't have nearly the number of regulations back then.

"The technology has changed a lot in 20 years. There has to be some kind of technology competency, and the younger drivers have been able to take advantage of that. Even something like a global positioning system might be difficult for an old-school guy who is used to taking out a map."

Heavily regulated

"The trucking industry is heavily regulated," Thropp said. "I wouldn't say a lot, but there are a few people who say that affects the driver shortage."

Myron Berkowsky, general manager at Sunrise Transport in Ephrata, Lancaster County, could be speaking for every trucking company in the region when he says: "We understand firsthand the challenges faced by our industry to recruit and retain drivers."

Berkowsky said that Sunrise Transport, which hauls fresh food products, is doing well in the economy.

"With growth, we have found ourselves with the need to expand our staffing levels to meet those growth requirements over time," he said.

"Since we are a regional motor carrier, which does the bulk of our business in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, we know that we compete with every other carrier in south central Pennsylvania and beyond for the professional driver," he said.

2015 report

The American Trucking Associations commissioned a study of the driver shortage nationwide was in 2015 by. Among the findings: The shortage problem got a lot worse after the nation recovered from the 2008-2009 recession.

The report, in part, noted: "Over the past 15 years, the trucking industry has periodically struggled with a shortage of truck drivers. The first shortage during this period was documented in a 2005 report. At that time, the shortage was roughly 20,000.

"During the last recession starting in 2008, the driver shortage was eliminated as industry volumes plummeted, resulting in fewer drivers needed. However, as industry volumes began to recover in 2011, the shortage slowly returned. The driver market continued to tighten, and the shortage skyrocketed to 38,000 by 2014."

The report also explored reasons for the shortage: "One of the largest factors is the relatively high average age of the existing workforce. The current average driver age in the OTR (over-the-road) truckload industry is 49. In addition, the industry has historically struggled to attract all segments of the population, as just 5.8 percent of truck drivers are women. This share has been essentially unchanged over time. Conversely, today 38.6 percent of drivers are minorities, which has jumped 12 percentage points from 26.6 percent in 2001.

"Today, motor carriers struggle to find enough qualified drivers, which makes the shortage 'feel' much worse than the numbers in this report. Many carriers, despite being short drivers, are highly selective in hiring drivers because they have made safety and professionalism high priorities."

Drivers with personality

Sunrise Transport takes it one step further, Berkowsky said. In addition to seeking candidates who have a clean driving record and a good attitude, like most companies, Sunrise Transport actually wants drivers with personality.

"So many times, individuals in our business are interested to find a driving job that does not require them to handle freight or interact with the end-customer," Berkowsky said. "In the case of Sunrise Transport, our drivers are required to do both.

"A Sunrise Transport driver performs many inside deliveries that require him or her to see that the product is being stacked in cooler or refrigerated storage areas until such time that the product can be moved directly onto the sales floor of the store," he said.

The interaction with the customer is extremely important and "provides us with an important, competitive advantage," Berkowsky said.

School enrollment rises

The good news for the industry is that more help appears to be on the way. Enrollment is up at schools such as Sage and Berks Technical Institute.

Young people out of high school and older adults who are unemployed, or seeking a career change, are discovering that truck driving is an attractive option. The average salary for a first-year driver is \$40,000 to \$45,000, according to Thropp.

Still, it's not a career for everyone. There are long hours on the road and time spent away from home. But trucking companies are recognizing this, Thropp and Gonzales said, and are offering more perks to make the job attractive.

"The time away from home is a big issue," Thropp said. "The trucking companies are doing their best to address that. One way is dedicated routes, where every trip is the same route from one point to the destination. They get to work the same hours."

There are smaller perks, too, such as reciprocal gym memberships around the country, Gonzales said. Thropp said the industry is working hard to attract more women and veterans. More veterans are discovering that truck driving is a viable career.

"They're well-educated, they have good judgment and they're healthy, disciplined," Thropp said.

"And being in the military, they're used to a disciplined environment."

Because there is much involved in earning a Class A commercial driver's license, it's virtually impossible for a person to pursue one on their own. The candidate needs to attend a school such as Sage or Berks Technical Institute.

A person must pass a written test and a skills test, and learn how to inspect a rig.

The big plus is that classes are relatively short: Both Sage and Berks Technical Institute offer four-week programs.

Real-world experiences

Gonzales said the BTI program is focused on real-world experiences.

"We're very focused on the individual student," he said. "We work with current equipment. All of our instructors have years of experience. You're not just working with a book: you're working with experienced instructors. We're not here to help you pass a test. We're here to make you a professional driver, which is the key."

At Sage, which operates schools in Lebanon and Allentown, the emphasis is on a one-on-one student-to-instructor ratio.

"The big difference with our program compared to some others is that all instruction is one-on-one," Thropp said. "It's one student, one truck and one instructor."

"The Sage program has a pretty comprehensive program that will walk people through all the steps for a CDL license. We have very, very good instructors. That's what it's all about. We have former drivers sharing their knowledge with students."

Gonzales said the word is out that truck driving is a good career.

"You can get a great entry-level position in CDL in just four weeks," he said. n

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