

Road Warriors

With a truck-driver shortage wreaking havoc on supply chains, transportation firms are making a new pitch to recruit women. **Our ride-along with one woman driver shows the challenge the industry faces.**

By Arianne Cohen

► THE PROBLEM

Women represent only 7 percent of truckers, in an industry facing its worst labor shortage in years.

► WHY IT MATTERS

The fastest fix for the shortage is to recruit from women and other underrepresented groups.

► THE SOLUTION

Drop many of the efforts previously tried—they haven't worked. Turn to redesigned work schedules and options that meet women's needs.

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A Ryder semitruck pulls into a warehouse parking lot where a parked maroon Nissan Rogue blocks its path, toy-sized in comparison. The truck swings its 28-foot trailer wide to avoid it and can't, instead pitching toward the Nissan and stopping an inch short of its bumper. The truck's driver-side window rolls down and a woman's voice rings out toward the building. "What is your vehicle doing? I'm not buying you a new one!"

A middle-aged man in a grease-stained T-shirt, the warehouse clerk, appears out of the dock entrance, wiping his hands on a towel. He smiles and waves hello. "OK, I'll move it."

This scene is unusual, not only because the driver is a smart aleck—she obliquely refers to her parking strategy as her “no-nonsense attitude”—but because she is one of the trucking industry's rarest creatures: a woman who drives a semi. “I've been doing this 30 years, and Elizabeth is the first woman trucker I've worked with,” says Jeremy Newton, the warehouse clerk.

Think about that for a minute. Thirty years. One woman. In Salem, Oregon, where women make up 58.9 percent of the workforce. Nationwide, women represent just 7 percent of truckers—a statistic that conceals the detail that many of those women team drive with a spouse. Elizabeth Twigger, 52, is something of a unicorn.

She efficiently unloads 11 pallets of oxygen tanks and sleep-apnea gear with some friendly help from Newton. He wishes this wasn't an anomaly. He likes that she always shares her arrival time, and then appears at that time. This is apparently not an industry norm. “The bad ones don't let you know when they're not coming or have a flat tire,” he says. “She's good.”

He isn't alone in this perception. Women are, objectively, good at trucking: “Women are better with equipment, better with customers, better with safety, take fewer risks, and have less turnover,” says Ellen Voie, founder and CEO of the Women in Trucking Association, an advocacy organization that has spent much of the last decade prodding companies to collect data on such details. Men are 20 percent more likely to be involved in crashes, which cost the industry a small fortune. From a business perspective, hiring women is a no-brainer.

Yet despite huge advances in workplace gender equality and entire departments devoted to inclusive hiring and retention, the trucking industry's gender statistics have budged only 3 percent in two decades. This scenario is not unique to trucking. Similar gender impairments plague sibling industries. Pilots and construction workers remain just 7 percent and 10 percent female, respectively. All three industries face massive labor shortages from similar causes: high numbers of retiring employees, pandemic worker losses, and the unexpectedly sharp economic rebound. It's easy

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Ryder truck driver Elizabeth Twigger on her haul through the Pacific Northwest.



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to visualize the situation: tiny labor pool, lots of demand. But the \$700 billion US trucking industry is of particular concern because it is the linchpin of the supply-chain slowdowns that are disrupting commerce nationwide. And it all could be alleviated by simply recruiting and retaining women. Which leads to the question: Why aren't there more women in trucking?

Despite its reputation as a man's job, trucking can easily be an ideal gig for women. Women drivers spend most of their time in their cabs, free of unwanted close proximity to other colleagues. Engine work and most heavy lifting are long gone, as unloading is often mechanized and drivers do no engine work beyond a pre-trip inspection (unless they own their trucks). And women are actually quite available for the job. Over two-thirds of the women in trucking do not have children at home, and even among women who are parenting, many have family or spouse or divorce arrangements that would facilitate their driving shorter hauls, say, 30 to 35 hours per week, much like nurses commonly

work three back-to-back 12-hour shifts over 2.5 days and spend the rest of the week with their families. This availability to log condensed hours is especially prevalent now, with many spouses working remotely who are more able to juggle childcare.

And raising children is, in fact, good trucker training, because truck driving is all about remaining two steps ahead of traffic, aware of surroundings, and safely anticipating the dynamics of, for instance, an agitated driver. To any parent who has survived a day with a teething toddler, this is child's play.

The widespread availability of women has been overshadowed by the industry's scramble to put bodies into driver's seats. "Trucking is so difficult to hire for, period," says Jacob Zabkowitz, vice president and general manager of recruitment-process outsourcing at Korn Ferry. He knows because he has hired truck drivers. New truckers need to have commercial driver's licenses (CDLs), must consistently pass drug tests (an increasing obstacle in states with legal marijuana), and must maintain clean driving records with no past DUIs. He describes the vibe: "Got a CDL? Got a clean driving record? Come work for us."

Driver shortages date back decades, and in previous

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incarnations, companies weathered them with overtime hours and fat recruitment budgets. But this time around, competition for drivers has pushed the industry to a spectacular average churn rate of 90 percent at large carriers (85 percent at smaller companies); Ryder's churn rate is low for the industry at 54 percent. For context, the construction industry's churn rate hovers around 21 percent. Keep in mind that the vast majority of new driver hires are hired away from fellow trucking companies. In short: the industry is facing a recruitment bonfire.

As you may have heard, humans don't change when they see the light; they change when they feel the heat—and this is the industry's first opportunity in decades to truly change. Will companies generate the urgency to get this right?

Many companies have taken a first step in recruiting women by placing ads in publications read by women, and axing campaign slogans like "Take a peek under our skirt," "Daddy's home," and "We're looking for a few good mustaches." These

outreach efforts dovetail with the broader watershed moment in corporate America on gender and diversity recruiting. "It's one of our strategic imperatives at every level in the organization," says Nancy Stefanowicz, CHRO at NFI, a supply-chain solutions company that employs 15,000—6,000 of whom are truckers. The company runs a "creative staffing" initiative with outreach to groups like stay-at-home moms, post-incarcerated adults, and part-time workers.

Attracting women is one thing; retaining them is another. At one large trucking company that hires several thousand drivers a year, a conversation with a hiring executive sheds light on what's going wrong. She described some of her role as "figuring out how we can keep our drivers happy." To do that, she collects data on where and when the company tends to lose new drivers, and analyzes that data in terms of route, team, and schedule. Where does the data show that women drop out? "I've never cut it gender-wise," she says. She also does not know where the women in her company are located, either geographically or by type of freight. What's not measured cannot be fixed.

Savvy companies are measuring. "The companies that care work hard on it," says Voie, who herself formerly managed retention and recruiting programs for Schneider. Last year, NFI surveyed its 100 women in manager-or-above roles and then addressed the gaps revealed by the survey, adding more maternity benefits and more development and mentorship programs, as well as boosting the presence of women managers. Truckers

TRUCKER MATH

STARTING PAY
\$40,000 to \$45,000

TOP PAY
\$180,000
(for hauling specialty or hazardous materials)

PAY ARRANGEMENTS
By the mile, by the load, or salaried (driver-preferred).

TRUCK OWNERSHIP
A minority of truck drivers own their own trucks. A new truck costs approximately \$160,000 and can typically earn \$4,000 per month. Used trucks are cheaper. Emergency repairs can be pricey.



are particularly at the mercy of their managers, who schedule their loads and routes and therefore control their incomes. “We are really finding that it’s better if we can align managers with employees, across the board,” she says, meaning giving women or minority employees access to managers they can relate to. NFI has doubled its female driver numbers over the last two years.

Same-gender training and nightly hotels with access to workout rooms (important in an industry with a notoriously unhealthy lifestyle) are slowly being put in place at innovative firms. But experts say that the most pivotal shift may be redesigning entry-level trucking jobs to be available to rookie women who can drive 28 to 45 hours per week, on a schedule that might be overnights or Thursday through Saturday or every other week. Trucking companies have traditionally balked at this, but experts say that long hours and first jobs that require leaving home are a major cause of the industry’s high turnover, regardless of gender. “When you first start off in driving, very rarely are you going to get a local job,” says Peggy Hinkle, director of human resources at Ryder. “Many companies, unlike Ryder, want you to get on the road and feel comfortable and be in the middle of nowhere and haul something for long periods of time.” This is a nonstarter for most women.

In the end, as any corporate leader knows, a little appreciation can go a long way and is often underrated. Prime Inc., which boasts 12 percent women drivers, hosts an annual Highway Diamonds gala for women drivers, and Walmart sponsors an annual award for women truck drivers. “Lots of companies are

celebrating their female drivers and saying, ‘We know it’s a tough job. You’re doing great,’” says Voie.

Back in Salem, Twigger finishes unloading her truck and begins her paperwork, jotting down exactly what’s still in the truck, and updating her delivery status on Ryder’s app. In a sure sign of the industry’s desperation for drivers, a warehouse driver walks by, and Twigger tries to recruit him to Ryder, which, like most companies, now offers referral bonuses to existing drivers.

“You gonna drive for us?” she asks.

“You hard up for drivers?” he returns.

“Everyone is.”

He politely waves her away. “I’ve got four weeks of vacation here, because I’ve been here a long time,” he says.

She’s undeterred. “I’ll get you your four weeks, plus \$5,000 sign-on and \$5,000 retention.” He shakes his head. He likes his job. They start gabbing about his new car.

She bristles, by the way, at the suggestion that trucking has anything in common with driving a car. The truck is enormous, and commanding it as a profession is like the difference between cooking dinner for one in a microwave versus a banquet for 100 in an industrial kitchen. She disappears into the trailer to rearrange the remaining palettes so that they can all be easily seen (she can’t unload what she cannot find), all actually fit (a common pitfall),

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and can be unloaded safely and in order. Unloading and reloading a truck can take hours.

She hopes that truck companies make it “much, much easier” for women to enter the industry. She recalls how 20 years ago it took her two weeks in driving school to learn how to back up, and then she was unable to find a job that aligned with her mother-of-four schedule. For a year. She finally found a first trucking gig at \$12 an hour, which ended after just two months. “Let’s just say I wasn’t very experienced,” she says. She then scrambled to pay her \$500-per-month rent, working three jobs. You know the costumed person at an intersection waving a giant arrow toward an accountancy during tax season? That was her.

All this eventually led to driving chickens. “That’s a dirty job. I didn’t like that.” Specifically, she drove the chicken truck of death, transporting a couple thousand 58-day-old chickens from a farm to their demise at a factory. She knew their precise age because she had also delivered them as chicks. “You’re face-to-face with chicken butts. It’s the job that craps on you, literally.” But the job was local and allowed her to balance her familial duties. She’s also driven for Walmart, driven shipping containers (“the ports are terrible to get into”), and hauled triple-wide manufactured homes behind a spotter car (“that’s the most exciting and intense job ever”).

Ryder is the best job she’s ever had. Her hourly rate has nearly tripled from her first driving gig, enhanced by certifications that allow her to drive nearly everything: flatbed trucks, box trucks,

“Tell them that it’s not scary at all. It’s empowering.”

day trucks, two-axes, three-axes, hazardous materials. She has her routine down to a fine art: she prefers to hit the hay in the late afternoon or evening and start driving at 1 or 2 a.m. (“I don’t like traffic if I don’t have to deal with it”). Her current route takes her back and forth from Washington to Northern California from Monday to Friday, and she stops midweek to see her baby grandson near Portland, Oregon. Her home is an hour away in Kelso, Washington, so she often sleeps in her truck. Her husband joins her on longer trips. While she drives, she talks on her hands-free phone to her mom or husband, or listens to K-Love contemporary Christian radio, all while binge-chewing Extra Sweet Watermelon gum. She eagerly scans for animals, like the awesome cinnamon bear she recently spotted running down the road in California.

If she could tell people something, it would be this: “It’s an amazing job. I’ve gone to so many different places and met so many different people and gotten to do so many different things.” Also, “Oh, tell them that it’s not scary at all. It’s empowering. You’re up high, and you can see.” Her best friend is a driver. They gab while they drive, and half-seriously joke about partner driving together in the future, in the same truck. “We wanna team drive and leave our husbands at home.”

GENDER GAPS BY THE NUMBERS

Percentage of Women

