Choosing a Trucking Company: High Tuition Rate at the School of Hard Knocks

In preparation for this article I performed a small (non-scientific) research survey on turnover. I surveyed operators who changed trucking companies three or more times in two years. I found that within five years 40% of them were no longer driving.

To those in the industry for a few decades this result is not a surprise. Some may even wonder why it wasn't higher than 40%. They wonder because they instinctively understand the type of person who moves that many times in two years. I did notice that within three years of leaving the industry about a third returned to driving (and +60% did not experience high turnover in the first two years of returning, however, by this time my sample size was very small).

There are standard explanations for operators who experience this: improper research of companies, misaligned expectations, faulty direct advice, emotionally charged circumstances or what I call an immature business decision model.

There are many people who make emotional decisions rather than business decisions. They operate their business by passion rather than scientific methods. Every choice has its own benefits but is also accompanied by its own disadvantages or unique requirements. Emotions cloud the affects of the looming disadvantages and are not truly seen until the move has been made. The "honeymoon time" usually refers to how the trucking company treats the driver, but it can also be assigned to how the driver realizes the new requirements. If the choice was emotionally based and requirement too clouded, the post honeymoon can easily be black ice.

When surveying the option to move your truck take a much closer look at the grass on the other side of the fence. Ask simple a question: have the companies positioned themselves differently in the industry?

There are low cost producers (who gain freight by undercutting competition) and constantly seek to drive costs down (at almost any cost) and there are high service oriented companies who are less concerned about costs when compared to high customer service.

Let's be clear, just because a company advertises high customer service does not mean they operate that way. High service oriented companies hire a high service oriented staff. If the company pays roughly the same as the company your leaving (or worst) you are not moving up, your moving sideways (maybe even down). If the turnover is higher where you plan on going, you are NOT moving up. If the rates charged the customer are basically the same at the new as it was at the old, you are financially moving sideways, not up.

High quality people attract high quality people. Mid quality people can sometimes have a combination of high and low while low quality owners/managers carry only a few high quality operators (but not for long).

I also suggest, if you are in the industry less than ten years, get advice from someone who's been around longer than twenty (preferably one who has some experience in navigating similar choices). Judge peoples character before taking advice, not just their financial appearances (banks can make some people look very wealthy).

Be realistic about expectations and stop the process the minute you see a red flag (evidence that doesn't line up with your expectations, promises or calculations). If you can, interview drivers who have left the company you are considering. Above all else, take your time.

Some of the best choices I've ever made are the opportunities I've declined. They saved me countless catastrophes.

As my research showed in the small survey (stated at the beginning of the article) high turnover operators often return to the industry and refrain from company hoping (at least some). This implies two things: companies read resumes and refuse to hire “jumpers” and some operators can actually LEARN things (all-be-it the hard way).

I’ve always said to my son (when he doesn’t ask) “there is a high cost of tuition for the school of hard knocks”.