



Build Awareness of Intermodal to Attract Job Candidates

Preparing students for their first intermodal job, experts say, takes more than just the important blend of classroom instruction and practical on-the-job experiences, such as internships. When we asked experts with industry, academic, recruiting and trade association backgrounds how students should best be prepared for that initial job in intermodal, a common thread emerged: build awareness.

“The first step is to increase awareness of the industry and the potential job opportunities it offers,” said Kristina Chambers, director of operations strategy and analytics at TTX Co.

“There has to be a little bit of a sales job – to make them aware of the value of intermodal and its positive environmental effects,” said Chambers, who is also a mentor at TTX, and is active in IANA’s new Future Intermodal Leaders Program. “They have an ability to make an impact, with quicker advancement potential compared with other industries.”

Richard Stewart, professor of transportation at the University of Wisconsin–Superior, agreed.

“Students have to be introduced to the industry,” he told Insights. “Transportation is ubiquitous, but most of us don’t pay attention to it. It’s not a topic covered in high school, unlike many other professions.”

Start Early

Rick Blasgen, CEO of the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals, said early exposure is exactly what’s needed.

“Get them before college,” he urged, by developing interest in supply chain positions through earlier education, at the high school

level. “It’s not like someone is going to go out to [students] and say, ‘Go do intermodal.’”

Jim Hertwig, principal consultant at Hertwig Transportation Consulting, also stressed awareness, while identifying the industry’s role in that process.

“The key is how we as an industry make intermodal better known to students,” Hertwig said. “The students I’ve talked with in many cases don’t know how important logistics is as part of the supply chain as well as the role intermodal plays. The intermodal industry provides numerous [job] opportunities working for carriers, intermediaries, suppliers or beneficial cargo owners.”

Experts identified a wide variety of factors, both in the classroom and elsewhere, which are important in developing a student’s skills that are needed to take full advantage of opportunities in the intermodal industry.

“At Georgia Southern, students are better prepared when they study principles that are vital to the industry and experience learning in the field via internships, co-ops or other industry and academic events,” said Jerry Burke, professor of operations management.

These universities in Georgia and Wisconsin also stress the roundtable approach, which brings dozens of industry executives to campus to interact with students and educators about career opportunities and the steps needed to become successful.

“This helps to convince students that a career in intermodal can be a great choice,” Burke said.



Chambers

Classroom Learning Builds Skills

Charlie Saffro, founder of search firm CS Recruiting, underscored the importance of the classroom component.

"While hands-on experience is always the best way to learn, the computer and math skills from the classroom are invaluable for any career in logistics," she told Insights. "Intermodal transportation tends to require more planning and problem solving and thus math skills translate well. Computer skills are essential for any office job and there has been a shifting focus on technology to create intermodal efficiencies so it's increasingly important to be tech savvy."

Stewart and others stressed the value of practical experience and exposure to the freight industry.

"Nothing compares to seeing the system in action," he said. "Students can get an introduction to the system through textbooks and resources, such as video clips. Often students don't understand the complexity of transportation, especially intermodal, until they see it."

Burke explained the value of internships from several perspectives. "Internships give employers an early look at potential hires for career openings and often leads to subsequent job offers," he said. "This gives students graduating from our program a lot of confidence and peace of mind in their final semester as they prepare to transition from student to professional."

Value in Mentoring

Chambers believes meaningful internships as well as mentoring are the best ways to get students excited about intermodal and keep them in the industry. Whenever interns and new hires come to TTX, she said, there is company-wide encouragement.

"I take mentoring and development very seriously, making sure that everyone gets involved in every aspect of the business," Chambers added. That means developing presentation skills, building business acumen and making sure everyone's skill set improves by constantly rotating them to different tasks in the department.

The experts stressed additional facets of the student transition into the workplace.

From the company perspective, Hertwig said, "Practical experience is of great value, but in many cases, hiring students just out of school allows a company to train them their way."

Internships once again are leading to job offers, Stewart said, as companies "fall all over themselves" to hire students with a transportation and logistics background after a dropoff during years when the economy was weaker.

The path to an intermodal position often is circuitous, another expert said.

"While logistics is an increasingly popular career path for college grads, I do not see a ton of graduates entering the industry with a specific intermodal focus," said Saffro. "Most graduates will steer towards a traditional truckload brokerage and learn the customer or carrier sales side of the business. The larger brokerages have created robust training programs that allow them to hire inexperienced candidates and train them in-house."

Once individuals gain experience in the industry (generally through brokerage), they will start to develop expertise, Saffro

added, directing them toward a more specialized career in intermodal or other parts of the industry.

Intermodal's Unique Opportunities

Another important part of attracting students to intermodal is differentiation.

"The intermodal industry offers a unique set of opportunities that many jobs in logistics (or elsewhere) may not," Chambers said. "Intermodal relies on efficient and effective partnerships across multiple transportation modes to be successful. I believe students would like the idea of being a part of an interconnected global transportation partnership."

"Instead of competing against every other programmer, engineering or tech guru, they can add value to an organization at a much faster rate," Chambers added.

Finding intermodal talent also can involve casting a wide net to embrace fields such as information technology and engineering, she said.

Along with all the other components, there is a personal side to job preparation and hiring.

Stewart said a match between candidate and company occurs when an intern recognizes and values the corporate culture, and the company demonstrates that it values the student's input and their future potential. Students can demonstrate their value by asking questions as well as being polite and respectful at all times.

"Despite what the other person is doing you must be polite in order to be respected in the long run," he noted. "People can learn a great deal ... in management skills from excellent managers as well as poor managers."

24/7/365 Operation

"My job also is to talk them and say to them that intermodal is a 24/7/365 operation," Stewart said.

"It will require some time behind computers and out in the field," he explained. "You will get the call at 4:00 a.m. Sunday morning, and you'll be expected to assemble a team to solve the problem. You must be able to work with computers, machinery, constantly changing procedures and policies and above all else do it safely 100 percent of the time. If you don't like this exciting, challenging and constantly evolving field, we've got other majors on campus."

Several experts said that the global nature of the industry can be a draw for students who would like to work in a variety of international settings.

Chambers, Blasgen and others said that trade associations can partner with each other, and with universities. That can involve steps such as joint marketing campaigns and encouraging more companies to participate in on-campus events.

"One suggestion would be a promotional video highlighting the direct impact of the intermodal industry on the U.S. economy," Chambers said. "We can build connections and spark interest in the field by providing specific examples of how transportation companies partner across shipping, rail and trucking companies."

Part of the exposure process also is showing how opportunities extend beyond the transport workers who are most visible to the average American.

"We need to explain the many types of careers available," Blasgen said.