



Improving the Driver Experience at Port, Rail and Customer Facilities

For intermodal, retaining drivers and improving their experience is both a much-desired goal and a complex process.

Gerry Bisailon, who chairs IANA's Driver Experience at Intermodal Facilities Task Force, joined carrier officials and other industry experts in sharing their perspectives on intermodal driver retention and improving their experience.

Because of the unique nature of intermodal trucking, improving retention and experience "is a complicated network problem with a lot of moving parts and stakeholders," said Bisailon, who is vice president of optimization, engineering and mechanical at Remprex.

Many of the unique factors that aren't faced by OTR drivers occur in intermodal terminals, he said.

"Drivers can easily become frustrated when sitting in long queues, or multiple queues at the same terminal, or they cannot get quick access to courteous and professional help," Bisailon said. "When a driver runs into an issue, their time spent in terminal can quickly go up, and can impact their next assignment, and potentially cause them to lose money or delay a customer's freight, which can also bring additional fees and charges for nonperformance."

Multiple Roles

To address terminal challenges, Bisailon said, "Everyone has a role to play to some degree – the dispatcher, the driver, the terminal operator, the equipment provider, the chassis provider and the BCO."

Drivers can help themselves by having accurate information about facts such as the requirements for entry and the number, location and reservation number of the container being picked up in the terminal, Bisailon said. At the same time, they need to know the terminal's operating rules, layout and how to contact assistance if needed.

Terminal operators' tasks include examining terminal layouts to make sure they are appropriately marked, intuitive and provide drivers with appropriate interfaces or technology to expedite movements through the facility. Accurate inventory is a critical piece of the terminal experience, as well as operators' focus on every part of the terminal experience, such as lifts, to reduce the variability associated with those processes, he added.

Other commenters emphasized that there also are many other factors also affect intermodal driver retention. They included treating drivers as professionals, being responsive to their needs and expectations as well as factors such as compensation and equipment quality.

"Drivers stay where they feel respected, important and heard," said Marcia Faschingbauer, president and CEO of Excargo Services. "Drivers like working where life is easier: clean yards, reliable communication, good safe equipment and proactive communication. Drivers stay where there is work and will hang in longer if the above are true."

"The most important factors are treating drivers professionally and valuing their time," said Jim Filter, senior vice president and general manager – intermodal at Schneider, especially for frontline supervisors who have a critical role in living up to those commitments.

For Fred Johring, president of GSLTrans, driver retention is a matter of treating them as a member of the team, and particularly being responsive to the intelligence they provide about conditions at other fleets.

"They don't have to be paid the same as other companies, but they need to know they are being treated fairly," he said.

Carriers' Role

Carriers have a particularly important role in the driver experience, several experts said.

Open dialogue is a critical part of a positive driver experience, said Jim Gillis, president of IMC Companies' Pacific Drayage Services unit.

"Take the time and listen to your drivers! If they feel that you are listening and acting on their recommendations or helping to solve a problem, then you'll drive engagement with your fleet," he said. "The driver experience and happiness factor go far beyond a weekly paycheck. Competitive pay is an absolute must, but building an engaged workforce is even more important."

It's important to know each driver as an individual, as well as their families and know their stories, Gillis added, which can best be accomplished with individual meetings.

"Fleets need to consider not only how their actions impact their drivers, but also how their customers and rail providers impact the driver experience," Filter said, "particularly the speed and quality of each engagement."

Ellen Voie, president of Women in Trucking, said the best fit between drivers and carriers is based on lifestyle and preferences, such as home time, level of exertion, truck specifications and type of run.

"Carriers need to be more focused on the driver themselves," she said, "instead of viewing them as 'capacity'. People don't even consider leaving a carrier unless their expectations aren't being met."

She also cited an important difference in predicting turnover, citing a study done by StayMetrics, which found that home time is the most important retention factor for men, while safety is the top choice for women. Women also ranked carrier and dispatcher relationships higher than men, she added.

Norris Beren, founder of Risk Reward Consulting, and Dirk Kubar, president of TruckRight, provided a wide range of perspectives.

"Honesty is paramount," Beren said.

He emphasized optimizing driving time, competitive pay, fairness in dispatching, and particularly the importance of dispatcher actions to ensure that drivers remain satisfied with their assignments and have incentives to move more loads instead of stopping work before running out of hours.

"Driver retention doesn't need to be confusing or complicated," Kubar said. "The biggest issue is a lack of communication" among owners, managers, dispatchers and drivers.

"We've found it's just as important to ensure drivers feel engaged" from the moment they apply for a job, he added. "Show drivers you actually care. Get to know them. Make them feel valued. Call them by name. Make their day-to-day tasks easier. It's really that simple."

Experience Enhancers Abound

Because successful intermodal operations require so much cooperation among so many providers, it's hardly surprising that there are literally dozens of ways to improve the drivers' experience once they are committed to a carrier.

Tom Williams, vice president of BNSF Railway's consumer products group that includes intermodal, provided three examples of the carrier's driver-related enhancements. They include a mobile app for drivers, a touchless in-gate system and automated straddle carriers.

"We continue to invest in our hubs and technology to create a seamless experience for our trucking partners," he said, citing three examples. "We continue to test new ways of reducing gate times and increasing overall driver fluidity."

Gillis also stressed how technology is helping to improve both efficiency and safety.

PDS's safety enhancements include collision mitigation, lane departure assist, geofencing and electronic braking.

"Some of that technology has allowed us to more easily social distance and to provide 'touchless delivery' during Covid-19 for the benefit of both drivers and our customers," he added.

Filter commented that one key element of improving the driver experience is drop-and-hook freight that saves time in comparison to live load or unload. He also mentioned that wider shipping windows create more opportunities to match loads, increasing drivers' productivity.

At Excargo, Faschingbauer said giving drivers a voice and having a support system are important.

"Drivers love to get the type of work they prefer most of the time and flexibility to do it at times that work for them," she said. Carriers can help by being family friendly, by being balanced and by appreciating the driver's full life.

Communication Is Important

Johring stressed communication to make sure drivers are aware in advance of the carrier's plan for them.

"Make sure they know dispatch is jumping on their issues when they arrive and communicates with them about what's being done," he said.

Kupar agreed.

"A lot of owners/managers continue to be surprised when we tell them that a lack of communication is a top concern for drivers," he said. "And so, finding ways to avoid miscommunication from happening is paramount. Managers need to carefully consider what systems, processes, etc. can be established to make day-to-day tasks easier and more streamlined for drivers." He added that a rewards program is another way to improve driver experience.

Voie emphasized communication of advance information.

"Anticipate what the driver is going to experience that day. Will there be adverse weather, loading delays or customer issues? Be as transparent as possible. The more information you can provide, the fewer "surprises" she or he will encounter."

That information also includes factors such as closed rest areas.

For intermodal drivers, Beren said swift assistance with maintenance defects on chassis or containers will please drivers by reducing downtime. Finding out what type of runs they prefer and what they "won't do" enhances their experience as well as simply being nice to them.

Experience at Facilities Is Crucial

Voie also underscored the importance of driver treatment at facilities and the importance of finding safe parking areas, which can be scarce.

"Drivers would have a better experience if there are rest rooms or showers readily available," she said as well as additional food choices, a lounge area and even a courtesy car.

At shipper facilities, she noted how important clean, well-lit and welcoming waiting areas are.

"Any shipper that refuses to accommodate drivers with basic human needs (toilets, water, food) should reconsider these attitudes," she said.

Bisaillon believes that driver treatment at all types of intermodal facilities is a variable experience.

"There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that there is a significant difference in driver treatment between modes at intermodal terminals," he said. Instead, he said, treatment of drivers varies at locations at rail and port facilities, with some that are better than others.

Bisaillon identified an opportunity to benchmark best practices that can be used at all types of facilities to improve the driver experience. Examples of best practices include appointment systems, use of mobile apps, automated gates and appropriate facility signage, including striping and marking of lanes and parking locations.

"Truck drivers are an integral part of our maritime community," said South Carolina Port Authority spokeswoman Liz Crumley. "SC Ports' efficient terminal operations enable truck drivers to benefit from fast truck turn times. Our partnership ensures we can keep freight moving through fluid supply chains."

Johring said that treatment of drivers could be improved at some West Coast port facilities, though terminal management has made efforts to address the situation.

"Conversely, customer facilities are generally very respectful of drivers. A few are a little insensitive, but for the most part, they are very helpful," Johring said.

Filter and Gillis also stressed a variety of facility experiences.

"There is a difference between facilities in both how drivers are treated and how quickly they can get through each facility," he said, which can be improved by using data.

"We track drivers' time spent at all locations, as well as collect information about how drivers are treated. We share that information with customers and rail providers so that they can make improvements," Filter noted.

"We deal with good shippers/consignees and bad ones," Gillis said. "We're not looking for these facilities to roll out the red carpet but have a keen desire for them to treat drivers with the respect that they deserve. Ports and rails have the same breakdown of good actors and bad actors. The best marine terminal operators are working in collaboration with the trucking community."