

RECRUITING TOP DRIVERS: 3 TIPS FROM NTDC CHAMP GRAGG WILSON

- The nationwide driver shortage has made turnover particularly challenging in the trucking industry. An unsatisfied driver can easily move companies, leaving their former employer with the expensive task of rehiring.
- National Truck Driving Championships grand champion Gragg Wilson, a 37-year industry veteran, shared his perspective on how companies can attract and retain drivers.
- Drivers want fair, merit-based pay structures and on-the-job training. Successful companies adapt to meet industry demands and proactively limit turnover by anticipating driver concerns.

It's no secret that driver churn is one of the biggest challenges facing the trucking industry. With demand remaining high, qualified drivers always have the opportunity to seek greener pastures — some fleets report annual turnover rates as high as 90%. More than just a scheduling headache, the constant fluctuation can be costly.

By some estimates, it costs between \$20,000 and \$25,000 to recruit a new driver, once companies have factored in the time a truck was sitting idle during the hiring process. While raising wages seems like an obvious solution, most recruiters agree the trucking landscape is more complex than just dollars and cents. **Drivers want a healthy work-life balance, stability, and opportunities for career advancement.**

On an extended cut of the RoadSigns Podcast episode 122, TT spoke with National Truck Driving Championships 2023 grand champion Gragg Wilson. Wilson, a UPS driver and 37-year industry veteran, offered his top three tips on recruiting and retaining drivers.

1. Reward good driving, not time behind the wheel

As many as one in three employees will quit within the first 90 days of a new job. Traditionally, pay progression scales and delayed health benefits eligibility have hedged against the new hire flight risk. If someone leaves within a few weeks, the company isn't out much.

Yet considering the expense of hiring a new driver, it may be more cost-effective in the long run to offer enticing upfront packages. Wilson said that many companies are moving toward starting new drivers at the top of the pay scale, as well as offering benefits on day one. These competitive offers pay off: 54% of drivers say they're more likely to accept a position with a sign-on bonus.

As for raises, incentivized pay can inspire both company loyalty and top performance. In 2022, [Roehl Transport](#) introduced a new compensation plan that included accident-free pay boosts and performance bonuses.

Roehl is also one of the few trucking companies to pay on address-to-address mileage calculations instead of household goods mileage, giving drivers more flexibility to take sensible routes without fearing the choice will cut into their take-home pay.

New [in-cab technology](#) with real-time data makes it easier than ever for companies to structure fair merit-based incentive programs. Drivers can receive pay bonuses for safe and fuel-efficient driving, rather than an arbitrary amount of time at the company.

2. Offer on-the-job training — and make it fun

Driving a truck may seem intimidating for many people entering the workforce or considering a career change. Perhaps that’s why successful recruitment programs are often paired with training opportunities.

Driver training initiatives, such as [Trainco's sponsored community college program](#) or the [Walmart Private Fleet Development Program](#), allow drivers to earn their CDLs and undertake career development. The preparation leads to less stress, safer driving, and — in many cases — a longer stay with the company.

Trucking also has plenty of opportunities for continuing driver education if companies are willing to encourage it. [NTDC](#), nicknamed the “Super Bowl of Safety,” requires a written exam of commercial trucking industry regulations, a pre-trip vehicle inspection, and a driving skills test. “We have to go accident-free for a whole year before we can compete in our state competition,” Wilson explained.

Wilson credits his early days at Viking Freight System for his love of competitive driving. “In the mid-90s, I became the driver trainer at Viking,” he recalled. “They pretty much said, if you qualify to be in the [NTDC], we want you to compete.”

In 2000, Wilson qualified for his first national championship. He’s now a 14-time veteran of the competition. Although he’s been driving professionally for more than 30 years, NTDC allows him to continually hone his craft.

Overall, NTDC creates a positive, competitive atmosphere around safety regulations and operator best practices. “It’s like a big family reunion,” Wilson said. “The camaraderie is great.”

3. Listen well to driver concerns

Drivers may enjoy the camaraderie at the NTDC, but the day-to-day can be more of a grind. When TT asked Wilson to share advice for trucking company leaders on retaining drivers, his answer was simple.

“Just treat us like humans,” he said. “Listen to us when we have questions and concerns.”

Whether it's a question about how to become a fleet manager or a request to have more weekends off, ATRI found younger drivers increasingly want transparent and clear information. They also want opportunities to provide feedback on workplace policies. Fleet owners may not be able to accommodate every request, but Gen Z drivers especially appreciate knowing why a new idea is not feasible.

Wilson reinforced the importance of dialogue between companies and their drivers. "When companies listen to their employees... I think that's huge," he said. "We don't want to be treated like a number."

Though the life of a truck driver can be challenging, Wilson still believes that it is a sustainable career path. Asked for his advice to young people considering a career in the industry, he said, "It's a job that's going to be around for a long time. The hours are long, but the rewards are pretty good."

By heeding his advice and younger drivers' feedback on pay, training, and company culture, top organizations can make headway against the constant turnover.

This article is based on an episode of Roadsigns, a podcast exploring the trends and technologies that are shaping the future of trucking. [Check out the website to catch past and future episodes.](#)