

# Trucking's Ever-Revolving Door

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The rehire phenomenon in the truckload industry has engendered much speculation, with good reason. In a typical truckload company, 20% to 25% of drivers have left, returned and been rehired at least once — remarkably high numbers for a nonseasonal industry.

Our firm works closely with truckload carriers and we decided to find out which common assumptions about driver turnover are true, partially true or downright false. We also wanted to know what goes into a driver's decision to stay, leave or return.

Four major carriers — Schneider National, Covenant Transport, J.B. Hunt Transport Services and U.S. Xpress Enterprises — participated in the study, which was completed in September. We surveyed 426 drivers who had left and then returned to one of these companies at least once, with current tenures ranging from one to 18 months.

The data were analyzed according to fleet type, work configuration — e.g., over-the-road, local delivery — length of driver experience, marital status, age, sex, ethnicity and how many times each driver had been rehired by the original company.

Did the drivers who left find the grass greener at other trucking companies? For 61%, the answer was “no.” Only 39% said the new job met or exceeded expectations.

A simple “no fault” was the reason most (33%) cited for leaving the first job. Only 21% of drivers switching jobs said they got more money or miles — and many said the personal price wasn't worth it.

Here's what we discovered about three major assumptions about driver churn:

■ **True or false** — Drivers leave because they think they'll make more money elsewhere.

**Answer** — Mostly false, with 40% of those leaving not mentioning money at all. Of the 60% who did, 40% thought they'd earn the same or even less. Only 36% of that second group thought they'd do better financially. Fewer than half actually earned more at the new job — and many returned to the previous employer because the greater earnings weren't worth the working conditions.

Were the rehires glad to be back? Generally, yes: 62% said their expectations were being met and 87% reported that conditions were the same or better than before.

Once back, 83% planned to stay at least six months; 74% at least a year; and 53% more than five years — although we also found this could change quickly.

■ **True or false** — Drivers usually leave trucking for construction or manufacturing.

**Answer** — Only 26% of those leaving the four carriers switched to nontrucking jobs, and just a few of those went into construction or manufacturing.

■ **True or false** — Drivers leave for new work configurations, usually switching from over-the-road to local delivery.

**Answer:** False — 59% took jobs in the same configuration, and 33% of drivers opting for something different chose OTR. Only 21% switched to local driving.

But if drivers don't change employers because they want more money, a construction or manufacturing job, or a substantially different driving schedule, why do they leave?

Deciding to quit turns out to be a social dynamic — 76% consulted family and friends, but other “social” factors such as sex, marital status and ethnicity weren't particularly relevant to driver

turnover. Instead, the biggest factors for deciding to change jobs — and change back again — were:

■ **Years of driving experience:** Drivers with less than a year's experience and drivers with 10 or more years on the road were the most likely to leave for greater earning opportunities. Drivers with one to nine years' experience were happiest about returning to the original job.

■ **Driver turnover history:**

One-time rehires mostly leave for “no fault” reasons such as family crises or medical issues. Their second-most-frequent reason for quitting is the desire for different driving options with more time at home. One-timers said they returned to the former employer because they wanted job security, liked being in a “comfort zone,” liked the company and felt the old job treated them better than the new one.

Multiple rehires' reasons for quitting were quite different. They sought more money and/or were upset by on-the-job incidents that angered them or were perceived as unfair. Not surprisingly, multiples tended to be less loyal and engaged and more likely to quit again.

■ **Driver age:** When they're younger than 30, drivers leave for opportunities, not money. If they return, it's for job security and benefits.

In their 30s, drivers leave for “upward mobility” or interesting opportunities. They return for familiarity, feeling accepted and well-treated — and getting more money.

In their 40s, drivers quit for more home time or better driving options. They return for job security and better equipment.

In their 50s, drivers leave for — and get — better money. When they return, it's less about money and more about lifestyle and how well they feel treated.

In their 60s, drivers aren't likely to leave for more money. When they return, their concerns are autonomy and being treated with respect.

■ **Feeling appreciated by the employer:** The driver retention battle is a tug-of-war, with opposing forces pushing the driver out and pulling him or her back in. Money and miles can do both, because a driver afraid of not getting enough miles to pay the bills feels pushed to look elsewhere. Conversely, when money and miles at the original job are enough to get by on, that's a powerful pull.

Elements pushing drivers away include bad equipment, feeling unappreciated and “disrespected,” and being treated “like a number.” Other pushing incidents include “bad luck,” misunderstandings and events the driver interprets as unfair or exploitative.

Powerful pulling agents include that familiar comfort zone, job security and the driver's admiration for the company and identification with its brand. Driving options are also a strong magnet.

So, to keep good drivers or get them back, simply treat them well, offer them respect and appreciation and let them know the company truly cares about them. Never forget that 57% of rehires talk to other drivers about their experiences, good or bad. That can be either wonderful, free public relations or your worst nightmare.

*Based in Denver, Strategic Programs Inc. is a research and consulting firm the author co-founded in 1988 with Senior Vice President Diane Irvin.*

