

Truckknowledge Cos gear up to retain drivers

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FORGET technology. It's truckknowledge that is in focus now. Intensely driver-dependent sectors like logistics and infrastructure are finding attrition a major challenge. And though the auto industry is on a roll, a major chunk of this tribe is entering the 50-year age bracket, causing the demand-supply gap to widen.

Driver shortage is also hampering the entire spectrum of supply chain management functions. No wonder then, driving institutes, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, welfare measures and health programmes are among the slew of initiatives that are being undertaken by corporates to keep them on the rolls. While biggies like Maruti, Ashok Leyland and MRF have established driving schools, academies and CSR programmes to monitor this vital resource, others such as logistics majors DRS, PSTS and commercial vehicle major Eicher are fine-tuning and broad-basing their training initiatives to offset the shortage.

"Getting drivers is our biggest headache. Since ours is an industry which is extensively driver-reliant, we thought it's imperative to set up a driving school to meet the shortage," DRS Logistics chairman and managing director Dayanand Agarwal told ET. The group's transport institute is set for official launch by September in Hyderabad. With a fleet of 800 vehicles, DRS engages 1,600 drivers, whose average age are between 33 and 35 years, he added.

Six months ago, it launched a training programme at Toshan in Haryana. Around 100 drivers and supervisors have already been imparted training in two batches. Of India's five-million plus truck-driver population, 40% come from North India, with Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan being the primary sourcing points. South India accounts for 30%, with the concentration more in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, he added. PSTS Logistics is another company facing driver shortage. It has 600 employees and faces 20-22% attrition in the driver segment.

"We have identified one of our staff to be our manpower recruit head so that he can do the additional function of recruiting drivers. This way, he will remain in employment and will shoulder additional responsibility of meeting his business obligation," joint managing director Ganesh Ram told ET. Schemes like *khoob chalo, khoob kamao* as incentives to long-haul drivers and '*Budhape Ki Lathi*' insurance cover have been introduced, says DRS joint managing director AK Agarwal. The group is planning to take the strength of drivers to 6,000 by March 2008. A driver's monthly income of Rs 15,000 is boosted by an extra income via the km-based programme. If, according to industry sources, a chunk of long-haul drivers are being extensively used by the fleet operators to service the BPO sector, then immigration service companies like WWICS are not far behind. They are wooing this population to greener pastures like Canada, Australia and the US, where there is an acute shortage of the required skill-sets.

Canada alone faces a shortage of around 25,000 truck drivers. Annual salaries are in the range of 35,000 Canadian dollars, according to WWICS chairman and managing director Lt Col B S Sandhu. "Certainly, there is a dearth of good drivers. Our institute fulfils some of the requirements of the industry through training. The ex-servicemen-led team mans the training institute, which imparts exhaustive training to youth interested in the profession," MRF executive VP marketing Koshy K Varghese told ET, adding it also helps the drivers to get licence after course completion. The MRF Institute for Driver Development was started as a CSR initiative in 1988 and over the years it has trained unemployed youth in handling both heavy and light commercial vehicles.