

DRIVERS IN DEMAND



Adam Eschbach/IPT

Steve Gardner, a student in the College of Western Idaho trucking school, uses a state of the art truck driving simulator in Nampa.

Companies use incentives, bonuses to lure new drivers

By TORRIE COPE | tcope@idahopress.com | © 2014 Idaho Press-Tribune

The job comes with a competitive wage, benefits and, in some cases, a signing bonus. Not to mention employees can work on their own and travel to places they haven't been before.

Those are some of the perks listed in help wanted ads for truck drivers, yet locally and nationwide these jobs go unfilled, and there's a shortage of drivers available to keep up with demand.

Holman Transportation Services in Caldwell has been growing every year, even through the recession, thanks to a strong customer base, said Bob Holman, who owns the business with his wife, Cherry.

"We'd grow more, but finding people to do the job is very difficult, because it's a hard job, and a lot of younger people don't want to do the work," he said. "Recruitment isn't keeping up with the amount of drivers that are leaving the industry."

Holman is looking for 40 qualified drivers to keep up with his customers' needs. He's faced obstacles for years in finding drivers. Many of his drivers are getting older and retiring, he said, and there aren't more drivers coming up to replace them.

He was able to hire out-of-work construction workers when the housing market struggled in 2008 and 2009, but that just masked the problem of a driver shortage for a while, he said.

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Adam Eschbach/APT

Steve Gardner, a student in the College of Western Idaho trucking school, performs an alley dock outside the school in Nampa.

TRUCKING IN IDAHO

11,160 heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers in 2013

1,200 employers

50 percent higher concentration of the industry than the national average

\$900 million in exports

\$1.7 billion in revenues

45 years old or older, age of more than half of Idaho's truck drivers

\$17.20 median hourly wage in 2012

\$35,800 median salary in 2012

— Source: Idaho Department of Labor; Bureau of Labor Statistics

Trucking

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The number of heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers in Idaho is expected to increase 12.9 percent between 2010 and 2020, from 11,803 drivers to 13,232 drivers, according to the Idaho Department of Labor. There is a current shortage of about 25,000 drivers nationwide, according to the American Trucking Association, and about 96,000 new drivers will need to be hired annually to keep pace with demand.

There are different factors at play contributing to the driver shortage, said Julie Pipal, president and CEO of the Idaho Trucking Association, starting with an aging population of drivers. According to the Idaho Department of Labor, more than half of Idaho's truck drivers are 45 years old or older.

"We have drivers who have been in the industry for a long time, and what we're seeing is there isn't a new crop of drivers coming up," she said.

The time commitment is another deterrent for drivers, she said. Many people don't want to be on the road for weeks at a time, away from their families.

"The flip side of that is the industry is trying to adjust, trying to offer more home time, more flexibility, incentives, bonuses, anything they can do to increase the appeal for new drivers," Pipal said.

That's exactly what Holman has done. He said he tries to be flexible with his employees' routes and with shorter long-haul times so they can be home more often.

"We provide for our drivers some of the nicest equipment in the business with all the modern conveniences, basically, that they need," he said.

Some drivers are also being drawn to opportunities with the oil industry in North Dakota, with the promise of big money. Holman said he's had a few drivers leave for those jobs, but several came back to work for him again after it wasn't what they expected.

"It wasn't their cup of tea," Holman said. "It's a different lifestyle."

CWI TRAINS NEXT GENERATION OF DRIVERS

Steve Gardner of Boise finished his 14th week in the College of Western Idaho's Professional Truck Driving program last week. He has a job waiting for him at a local trucking company once he completes his tests with the program.

Gardner said he chose the CWI program because it was the longest and most extensive of the ones he was considering.

"After talking to potential employers, CWI was the most respected program to those potential employers," he said.

Program chair Tracy Younger said the program has a 94

percent job placement rate. CWI regularly holds events where students and employers can meet. The school also meets with employers to discuss changes in the industry and what they are looking for in drivers.

"It's up to us to help get them placed (in a job), but whether or not they stick it out is up to them," he said. "Retention is also up to the employer."

Younger said people interested in truck driving need to know what the career involves, especially if it means leaving behind a spouse and children for weeks at a time.

"It's not a lifestyle for everybody," he said. "Just know what you're getting yourself into."

But even during the tough years of the recession, the industry was still hiring, he added, and opportunities are out there.

CWI's 15-week program starts with classroom work, and then students progress to a simulator. Instructors throw obstacles at the students on the simulator including weather events, tire blowouts and vehicles entering the roadway. CWI also takes the simulator to high schools and career fairs to let people try it out.

"It's an amazing tool and amazing technology for education," Younger said.

Next, students get behind the wheel. In Nampa, they do field training to practice things like backing in a straight line and alley docking. They also have to learn how to chain up for winter driving. Younger said most of the time students are out on the road driving to places like Twin Falls and Riggins to log a couple hundred miles per day.

He said the main focus all along the way is on safety.

"If we can accomplish that, then we can save lives," he said.

Students have the option of testing out of the program after nine weeks if they've found employment, but Gardner said he chose to stay longer.

"I felt it would be beneficial to stay a few more weeks," he said.

Younger said CWI will offer a new two-year associate degree in transportation management beginning in fall 2015 that includes 15 weeks of professional truck driving experience at the end of the degree. CWI signed an articulation agreement with Boise State, which would let students have the option to continue on to a bachelor of business administration degree.

The Idaho Trucking Association is working with CWI and other driving training programs on strategies to recruit more drivers, Pipal said. They are also looking at industries that make good feeders for truck driving including the military, agriculture and timber.