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TRUCK DRIVER BURNOUT: WAYS CARRIERS CAN FIGHT STRESS-RELATED TURNOVER



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The four main job-related stressors truck drivers identify are: loneliness and loss of family life, health-related issues and uncertainty of health-related support, a lack of respect from various parties, and government regulations.

Drivers initially experience each of burnout's three dimensions in a specific order: exhaustion, cynicism, and then inefficacy. Inefficacy is a feeling of ineffectiveness. Drivers experiencing inefficacy are much more likely to quit.

Carriers can monitor driver burnout using Maslach's Burnout Inventory: General Survey. (See page 4.)

We offer ways firms can address all three burnout dimensions and their related stressors. (See page 12.)

INTRODUCTION

Trucking firms have spent decades trying to address the industry's driver retention problem. Yet despite those efforts, in 2019 the American Trucking Association [noted a shortage](#)¹ of 60,800 drivers. Past attempts have not solved the problem, so we are taking a different approach. We focus primarily on the often overlooked - but crucial - link between psychological factors and driver turnover. Below we identify stressors truck drivers face, examine the relationship between those stressors and burnout, and show driver managers how to monitor and address burnout before it causes drivers to quit.

Trucking can destroy you if you let it. Truck driving can make you very bitter and angry. Trucking can raise your blood pressure and be extremely stressful. Truck driving is filled with unexpected problems, rude people, and a total lack of respect for what you do and sacrifice everyday just so the guy who cut you off can get his [consumer electronics] a few bucks cheaper.

- Truckermike

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/09/576752327/trucking-industry-struggles-with-growing-driver-shortage>

In just my first six months I have survived being lost, exhausted, confused, stressed out, bewildered, angry, bored, and lonely beyond belief.

- Lucky13



STRESS AND BURNOUT

Trucking can be a stressful career partly because drivers are expected to juggle a multitude of relationships and interactions representing various, often conflicting, organizational goals and expectations. Their “boundary-spanning” role is complex. Drivers must interact with various company employees, try to meet customer expectations, and represent the company to the outside world. As they navigate these varied interactions and expectations, truckers also deal with long hours, heavy workloads, seemingly impossible deadlines, and various other stressors that are an unavoidable part of the job. In this paper we will address the four main job-related stressors drivers identify: loneliness and loss of family life, health-related issues and uncertainty of health-related support, a lack of respect from various parties, and government regulations.

Sustained, unaddressed stress can eventually progress to burnout. Burnout impacts drivers’ personal life, health, and job performance. It can also cause them to quit. Much of our understanding of occupational burnout stems from the work of social psychologist Christina Maslach. She identified the dimensions of burnout and helped create ways to assess it. In 1981 she co-authored the Maslach Burnout Inventory in order to gauge the burnout experienced by human services workers (healthcare, social work, counseling, etc.). She later adapted her survey for use in other fields.

The version of Maslach’s Inventory that applies to truckers is known as **Maslach’s Burnout Inventory: General Survey**. The survey consists of 16 items and takes 10-15 minutes to complete. It measures three dimensions of burnout: overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness known as inefficacy. Researchers who study truck driver burnout have used Maslach’s Burnout Inventory: General Survey. It can also be a powerful tool for carrier managers who want to monitor burnout-related issues and address them before they force a driver out of the company. You can find both the survey and the means to assess it [online](#).² By having drivers complete it at regular intervals and analyzing the results, managers can identify and address problems before they progress.

Maslach’s Burnout Inventory: General Survey Sample Items

1. I feel emotionally drained from my work.

Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day
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2. In my opinion, I am good at my job.

Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day
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3. I doubt the significance of my work.

Never	A few times a year or less	Once a month or less	A few times a month	Once a week	A few times a week	Every day
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Individuals experiencing high levels of burnout have high exhaustion, high cynicism, and high inefficacy. A recent study found that drivers initially experience each of burnout’s three dimensions in a specific order: exhaustion, cynicism, and then inefficacy. While that same study found that drivers do not generally consider quitting until they reach inefficacy, waiting until that point to address problems is risky. Therefore we will address all three burnout dimensions along with their related psychological stressors.

² <https://www.mindgarden.com/312-mbi-general-survey>

EXHAUSTION

The first dimension of burnout that truck drivers typically experience is exhaustion. Drivers are susceptible to both physical and emotional exhaustion due to the nature of their work. They log long hours on the road while simultaneously dealing with strict schedules, weather, traffic disruptions, company policies, government regulations, and customer expectations. Since truckers enter the profession expecting difficult work, exhaustion alone is not typically enough to cause them to quit. However, it is important to address burnout during this stage because exhaustion is a major [factor in accidents](#).³ Exhaustion can also progress to the other stages of burnout if left unaddressed.

RELATED STRESSOR: LONELINESS AND LOSS OF FAMILY LIFE

Within my first 3 weeks out, I actually broke down and cried one night when I was talking to my wife on the phone. I was that lonely. It just hit me so suddenly and unexpectedly that I didn't know what else to do. I had driven over 500 miles that day. I was tired, hungry, exhausted, and missed my wife and daughters more than I had in my entire life. I have not talked to a single soul all day, and when I heard my wife's voice, I just broke. – Blogger 8

Truck drivers spend long hours in relative isolation hundreds of miles from home. This contributes to the exhaustion many experience. It also contributes to one of the four major job-related stressors drivers identify: loneliness and loss of family life. While drivers often enter the career to provide a better life for themselves and their family, many wind up questioning whether the financial benefits outweigh the costs associated with being away from their family so consistently.

Logistics firms have long worked to get truckers home on a regular basis. Though time at home helps reduce exhaustion, driver managers may not fully grasp the psychological toll that loneliness and separation from family can have on drivers.

A vast majority of truck drivers deal with health related problems due to a sedentary lifestyle, poor quality food choices, and limited access to consistent healthcare. Some do choose to exercise frequently, but the demands placed on an over the road trucker tend to limit these activities.

- Blogger 6



RELATED STRESSOR: HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES AND UNCERTAINTY OF HEALTH-RELATED SUPPORT

Exhaustion can contribute to health problems and vice versa. A recent study found that drivers identify health-related concerns as one of the four major sources of stress in their job. Long hours spent sitting, limited access to healthy food options, and limited ability/desire to exercise after a day's work all contribute to the health issues truck drivers often experience. Moreover, drivers who experience health issues in a distant city may struggle to find effective, affordable treatment.

WAYS TO ADDRESS EXHAUSTION AND ITS RELATED STRESSORS

An obvious treatment for exhaustion is to get drivers home on a regular basis, as firms generally try to do. To the extent possible, firms may prioritize those with high levels of exhaustion/burnout.

Home time can also help mitigate the loneliness and loss of family life that drivers identify as one of the major pitfalls of their work. Firms who invest in resources to help their drivers prepare for and cope with those issues will likely benefit from that investment.

Firms can further differentiate themselves from their competitors by offering information to assist drivers when health-related issues arise, especially when the drivers are far from home. Multinational companies often provide "duty of care" plans for employees traveling overseas. Carriers may consider adopting similar strategies to assist drivers who have medical emergencies away from home. This may help drivers feel more valued by their company, which has been shown to help reduce turnover.

CYNICISM

The second stage of burnout drivers typically experience is cynicism. Cynical employees become less engaged and mentally distance themselves from their work. They may detach themselves from coworkers and customers, stop participating in projects, and adopt a negative tone toward others. Since drivers are “boundary-spanning” employees who regularly interact with coworkers, customers, and the general public, unchecked cynicism can damage both inter-and intra-organizational relationships.

RELATED STRESSOR: LACK OF RESPECT

One of the four major stressors that drivers identify is a perceived lack of respect from those both inside and outside their company. Truckers regularly interact with a variety of people, and they report frequent disrespect from many they encounter. It is not uncommon for drivers to feel that everyone is working against them.

Many feel that driver managers, dispatchers, and customers treat them in ways that suggest they do not appreciate the sacrifices associated with the job. Many truck drivers also report frequent episodes where drivers of smaller vehicles endanger all involved through reckless maneuvers that do not account for the size, weight, and view issues inherent in driving a semi-truck.



Drivers often cite low wages as proof of the disregard others have for their work. Many report that their pay does not match their work weeks that regularly exceed 40 hours. One driver interviewed for a recent study noted that the federal government’s wage rating system places drivers on the same level as janitors. Though that is not technically true, the fact that many feel underpaid is significant. And while drivers’ pay may not be as bad as some perceive, in 2005 the U.S. Office of Personnel Management listed painters at a higher pay grade than truck drivers. Given the heavily regulated training and licensing truck drivers are subjected to - and the complete lack of special permits or licenses required to be a painter - it is not surprising that many truckers feel underpaid.

WAYS TO ADDRESS CYNICISM AND ITS RELATED STRESSOR

Many firms have recently begun raising driver wages in an attempt to reduce turnover. Higher wages will likely help with the financial disrespect that many feel, but firms will still need to address the other sources of disrespect that can make drivers cynical.

There are many controls and regulations for drivers, but there really needs to be more controls on shippers and receivers. They can keep us waiting for hours past our appointment times, wasting our time, and therefore decreasing our chances of a financially productive week.

- Truck Driver 58

Research [has shown](#) that drivers with better professional relationships have reduced stress levels and are better able to cope with stress.⁴ Company events - such as an annual cookout - provide opportunities for drivers to build social networks within the organization. Those networks may help combat the loneliness drivers experience on the road. Moreover, the resulting social relationships between drivers and driver managers/dispatchers may lead to more respectful interactions in the future.

Companies can also fight the disrespect that drivers often feel by actively promoting respect for drivers within the company. One way to do this would be to require all new driver managers and dispatchers to spend a week on the road with a driver. This may make them more empathetic about the stress drivers experience. It could also give managers insight into an individual driver's personal life and preferences when choosing freight loads and routes.

Firms may consider scheduling extra time with new customers or stressful accounts to allow drivers to meet with them to discuss expectations and potential challenges to meeting those expectations. These meetings may lead to more positive interactions in the future, thereby helping reduce the disrespect that drivers often feel from those outside the company.

Teach four wheelers to drive and respect big trucks. - Truck Driver 36

Dispatch doesn't care either. I can't tell you how many times I felt like taking that Qualcomm and smashing it to pieces. - Blogger 3

⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.2158-1592.2011.01016.x>

Driving a truck is a damn good career choice but the way the federal government has got their hands in it, it just ain't what it used to be. They focus more on targeting truck driver's minor traffic infractions and not enforce the same on people driving cars and pickups.

- Truck Driver 1

INEFFICACY

While cynical drivers may feel like competent professionals being undermined by incompetent coworkers and/or government regulations, those who enter the final stage of burnout have lost that confidence in their own abilities. Inefficacy is a feeling of ineffectiveness. Drivers experiencing inefficacy may feel both unproductive and incapable of succeeding in their current role due to a lack of skills or resources.

Confusion over ever-changing government regulations can help cause feelings of inefficacy. So can role ambiguity, which involves uncertainty about the expectations one must meet to succeed at their job. Inefficacy can also stem from the belief that one's organization either cannot or will not provide the tools needed for success. Inefficacy can be something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, since feelings of ineffectiveness can manifest in an actual reduction in productivity.

Once drivers begin to feel inefficacy, they are much more likely to seek a new job or career. Therefore, it is vital that firms address inefficacy-related issues.



RELATED STRESSOR: GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS

Government regulations are the fourth major source of job-related stress reported by truck drivers. Drivers often view government regulations as a source of disrespect. Many see their work as being over-regulated in a way that suggests a lack of regard for individual drivers' judgment. Many truckers believe government regulations limit their ability to maximize their pay. Some view recent regulations that increased scrutiny of driver safety records and health status as both a source of stress and evidence that they are being unfairly targeted by the regulatory system.

Government regulations can contribute to inefficacy when drivers do not understand the meaning of and intent behind new laws or feel the regulations make it impossible to effectively perform their work.



WAYS TO ADDRESS INEFFICACY AND ITS RELATED STRESSOR

Since role ambiguity helps create feelings of inefficacy, managers should give drivers clear guidance on the expectations they must meet to succeed.

While firms cannot control government regulations, they can fight inefficacy by devoting resources to helping drivers understand and work within those regulations.

Trucking firms can also help prevent inefficacy by providing social support that helps drivers feel that they have what it takes to be effective in their role and that the company supports them. Firms can give social support through meetings, seminars, tension reducing programs, wellness programs, and skill development training.

Managers can provide social support through managerial strategies that focus on appreciation, recognition, and building self-worth.

Positive relationships between drivers and company employees are another form of social support. As noted earlier, carriers may foster positive relationships between drivers and other employees both through company events and by requiring new driver managers and dispatchers to spend a week on the road with a driver as part of their training.



CONCLUSION

Research suggests that truck drivers often just want to believe that the firms they work for actually care about them and their families. Driver managers can win a degree of loyalty from drivers simply by acknowledging the stressors identified in this paper. However, those firms who go further and address the issues outlined here will likely yield far greater benefits in terms of driver retention. Through a combination of proactive measures and targeted actions that address a driver's specific dimensions of burnout, carriers can fight the turnover problem that has plagued trucking for years.

ADDRESSING DRIVER BURNOUT: A GUIDE FOR MANAGERS



BURNOUT DIMENSION

RELATED STRESSOR

WAYS TO ADDRESS

Exhaustion

Loneliness and Loss of Family Life



Get drivers home on a regular basis. Consider prioritizing drivers with high levels of exhaustion.

Health-Related Issues and Uncertainty of Health-Related Support

Provide resources to help drivers prepare for/cope with the inevitable loneliness and separation from family they will experience.

Offer information/assistance to help drivers when they get sick, particularly when they are in a distant city.

Cynicism

Lack of Respect



Ensure market alignment with wages for drivers who have performed well.

Promote respect for drivers within your company.

Host events where drivers can get to know their co-workers.

Require new driver managers and dispatchers to spend time on the road with drivers as part of their orientation.

Schedule extra time with new customers or stressful accounts to allow drivers to meet them and discuss their expectations/potential obstacles to meeting those expectations.

Inefficacy

Government Regulations



Give drivers clear guidance on the expectations they must meet to succeed.

Provide resources to help drivers understand and work within government regulations.

Provide social support to show drivers that they have what it takes to succeed and that the company supports them.

Firms can provide social support through meetings, seminars, tension reducing programs, wellness programs, skill development training, and company events.

Driver managers can provide social support by employing managerial strategies that emphasize appreciation, recognition, and building self-worth.





Sources: This white paper draws from two peer-reviewed articles. The driver quotations and information on stressors come from a 2017 *Transportation Journal* [article](#) titled “The Truck Driver Experience: Identifying Psychological Stressors from the Voice of the Driver.”⁵ It was written by Donnie F. Williams Jr. (University of Arkansas), Stephanie P. Thomas (University of Arkansas), and Sara Liao-Troth (Georgia College & State University). The trio also wrote the second article that informed this white paper, with Thomas as lead author and Liao-Troth and Williams as her co-authors. That [article](#) is “Inefficacy: The Tipping Point of Driver Burnout.”⁶ The June 2020 *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management* article provided the information on how burnout progresses and leads to driver turnover.



⁵ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/transportationj.56.1.0054?seq=1>

⁶ <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/IJPDLM-07-2019-0223/full/html>

Ron Gordon is the Communications Specialist in the Supply Chain Management Research Center in the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas. He partners with SCMRC faculty to create white papers and summaries of faculty research for broad industry dissemination. Ron holds a B.A. in History Education and M.A. in History from Arkansas Tech University and holds a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Arkansas.

Donnie F. Williams, Jr. is a Clinical Assistant Professor of Supply Chain Management and the Executive Director of the Supply Chain Management Research Center at the University of Arkansas. Donnie earned a BBA in Finance, an MBA and his Ph.D. in Logistics and Supply Chain Management all from Georgia Southern University. His current research interests include understanding and overcoming barriers to innovation in the logistics industry, strategic human resource management through talent and workforce management, leadership in the logistics/supply environment and alignment between strategic goals and operational performance. His work has been published in the *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, *Transportation Journal*, *Marketing Theory & Practice*, *Supply Chain Management Review*, and *Supply Chain Quarterly*.

Stephanie Thomas is currently an Associate Professor of Practice of Supply Chain Management in the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas. She earned a B.A. and M.B.A. from the University of Tennessee, and a Ph.D. in Logistics/Supply Chain Management with a Marketing support area from Georgia Southern University. Prior to the University of Arkansas, she was an Assistant Professor at Texas Tech University. She enjoys incorporating her previous work experience with Lowe's Companies, IBM, and Stanley Tools in her class discussions. Dr. Thomas has a variety of research interests including buyer-supplier relationships and supply chain negotiations, as well as the behavioral and psychological side of truck drivers as high turnover rates challenge transportation organizations. Dr. Thomas is actively engaged with Walton SCM students, and serves as the faculty adviser for Women Impacting Supply Chain Excellence (WISE) and founder of the WISE Future Leaders Symposium.

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