Rising Driver Turnover Rate Makes Driver Comfort Critical for Retention and Recruitment

KIRKLAND, Wash. – Tick, tick, tick. That's the sound of driver turnover rates ticking upward, making driver comfort especially critical in fleet efforts to retain and recruit drivers.

The turnover rate for over-the-road drivers at large truckload fleets rose to 79% in the second quarter, its highest level since the second quarter of 2008, according to a recent American Trucking Associations (ATA) report.

An increase in average truck driver age, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's Compliance, Safety, Accountability (CSA) program, coming hours of service revisions, and new health rules for drivers are among factors contributing to a growing driver shortage, which is estimated by some industry analysts to reach several hundred thousand. It can cost thousands of dollars to recruit a new driver to replace a driver who leaves.

"We don't expect that turnover number to abate anytime soon," said Reid Nabarrete, Kenworth assistant general manager for marketing and sales. "As a result, driver comfort is becoming an increasingly critical dynamic in both driver retention and recruitment. It's imperative for fleets to operate the right quality equipment and provide important amenities in their tractors to secure and keep drivers."

Nabarrete said driver comfort has always been a Kenworth hallmark. "Providing exceptional driver comfort is embedded in Kenworth's heritage, as is truck durability, performance and low operating cost. Some fleets often purchase a number of Kenworth trucks fully loaded with amenities as reward trucks for their best drivers. Second and third owners also prefer a comfortable truck, which is another reason that Kenworth trucks possess high residual value," he said.

According to Nabarrete, Kenworth utilizes many different means to obtain feedback on driver needs and wants. "We use regular driver councils and customer councils, focus groups on a specific project or item, and spend numerous hours riding with customers in all types of trucks. Regardless of the method, we're constantly using direct input from the end user and customer to drive our product design."

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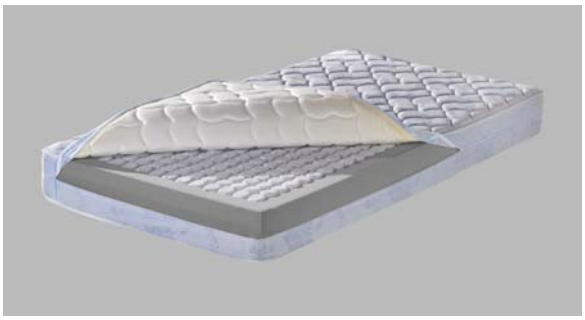
So, where does comfort start? “Since drivers spend most of their time at the wheel, driver comfort really begins with seats,” Nabarrete said. “The feel of a seat is often a personal preference. Our focus is to provide comfortable, ergonomically friendly seats with adjustability to accommodate all heights and sizes – from short to tall and petite to large. The more the driver can adjust seat travel, back angle and lumbar support, the better.”

The Kenworth T660 and Kenworth T700, both aerodynamic models often preferred by over-the-road fleets, offer numerous seat choices, including the Kenworth Air Cushion Premium Plus.

The T700 also will add the new Kenworth GT700 seat series with advanced air suspension system that can automatically adjust to driver weight, and has an adjustable shock for a full range of height adjustments. The premium GT703 seat will come with an exclusive upper back adjustability feature for improved shoulder and neck support over a wide range of recline angles. All GT700 series seats will offer optional heating, while the GT703 adds a cooling option.

For those fleets running sleeper trucks, a high-quality, comfortable mattress is important for rest periods. “Kenworth’s premium pocket innerspring mattress is standard on lower bunks in our Class 8 models equipped with sleepers,” said Nabarrete.



Independent high-tensile wire coils in a cylindrical spring are wrapped in high-density fabric to maximize wear strength and minimize friction and noise. Each coil forms an individual pocket, which absorbs weight and does not distribute the load to other coils. This enables the mattress to provide even support, a higher comfort level, reduced motion and increased longevity. “We made this mattress standard in response to Kenworth customer recommendations. It’s another way to provide drivers with a comfortable environment,” he said.

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Cab and sleeper size are also important. “The bigger and wider, the better for driver teams and the solo driver who wants the ultimate in comfort,” Nabarrete said. “For example, the Kenworth T700 has plenty of space to work and live on the road with nearly 30 inches between the seats and a best-in-class 60 cubic feet of storage. Its standard 75-inch AERODYNE® sleeper has 8 feet of headroom, pull-out desk, Xenon incandescent lighting, and optional adjustable flat panel TV mount and drawer-style refrigerator to provide the greatest convenience and comfort for the long haul.”

“It’s important for us to keep our drivers comfortable and productive, which is why the Kenworth T700 has become our aerodynamic truck of choice. The T700 offers our team drivers a comfortable work environment with a bigger interior and room for drivers to stand and stretch their legs between shifts,” said Joe Herman, president of Danny Herman Trucking, which operates some 35 Kenworth T700 and is based in Mountain City, Tenn.

The fuel-efficient Kenworth T700 equipped with the low-emission PACCAR MX engine was named the 2011 Heavy Duty Commercial Truck of the Year by the American Truck Dealers.

For fleets running regional hauler or vocational applications, Nabarrete recommends spec’ing the Kenworth Extended Day Cab, which further enhances comfort with an additional six inches of length and five inches of cab height compared to Kenworth’s traditional day cab.

The Extended Day Cab also offers two more inches behind the wheel, additional leg room, up to 21 degrees of recline in the driver’s seat, and two extra cubic feet of storage behind the driver’s seat. For Extended Day Cab and day cab configurations, an optional workstation between the driver and passenger seats is available for the Kenworth T660, T800, W900 and C500.

Ergonomics also plays an important part of the driver comfort equation. “From the steering wheel, to the dash, to the pedals, to the legroom, and even back into the sleeper, Kenworth spends significant time making its trucks ergonomic and comfortable. We even work with a full-time Ergonomic PhD to support designs,” said Nabarrete.

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In the cab, the optional and ergonomic Kenworth SmartWheel® provides engine brake, cruise, and light controls at the driver's fingertips on the steering wheel. Kenworth also offers an easily adjustable, telescoping tilt steering column as an option. Since the Kenworth cab design does not require a doghouse for the engine, the driver receives room for a more ergonomic foot placement when running in cruise control.

For easy access and viewing, the Kenworth dash features large and chrome bezels, LED back-lighting in the face plate and pointers, and dash rocker switches with LED indicator lights. "We explore various ergonomic questions when developing a dash layout. How do the switches feel? Does the switch or control give tactile feedback when thrown? How bright are the indicator lights at night time? Are the dash and controls layout logical and the design intuitive?" said Nabarrete.

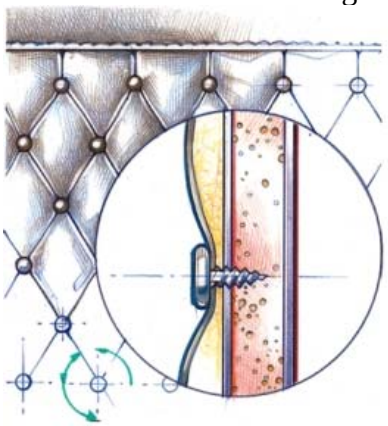
"We also focus on additional components that might not be so obvious. The optional HID (high intensity discharge) headlamps in the T660 and T700 have a wavelength that closely represents daylight. This may help to reduce both eye-strain and driver fatigue at night – a big plus for vehicle operation," he said.

Another important spec'ing for driver comfort element involves ways to reduce in-cab noise intensity. "Noise can be fatiguing over long periods of time. Kenworth has made significant strides in reducing interior noise, vibration and harshness," stressed Nabarrete.

"For example, the PACCAR MX engine is significantly quieter – both at idle and traveling down the highway – than the previous generation of engines, and many customers have commented favorably on its quiet operation," he said.

The PACCAR MX achieves the noise reduction through use of compacted graphite iron (CGI) to increase stiffness of the cylinder block and head, combustion optimization that helps minimize excessive combustion noise, and the cam-in-block and rear gear train which reduce torsional vibrations in the engine.

"In addition, fleets can specify the optional Kenworth QuietCab® package, which utilizes a dash pad, cowl blanket, firewall blanket, and floor pad for additional insulation and reduced noise," Nabarrete said. "A lower noise level certainly provides a better environment for the driver. Plus, as an added bonus, the driver can even listen to the radio at half the normal volume setting."



And don't forget to consider spec'ing driver friendly, advanced technology that can make the driver's life easier, noted Nabarrete.

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"Truck fleets interested in retaining their good drivers can spec their Kenworth trucks to include the new, factory-installed Kenworth NavPlus® system, which can make driving a more enjoyable and less stressful experience," Nabarrete said.

The PC-based, in-dash NavPlus system includes true truck-specific navigation, vehicle data, hands-free phoning, audio controls, camera inputs, roadside assistance, and optional Internet access. NavPlus is pre-programmed with the 1-800-KW-ASSIST number for one-touch access in the event of a roadside incident, offering driver peace of mind.

The PACCAR proprietary navigation and business technology system, is standard on Kenworth trucks with all premium interior trim offerings and on Kenworth diesel-electric hybrid vehicles. The system is available as an optional upgrade with all other Kenworth interior trim packages.

"In addition, the Kenworth Driver Information Center is another excellent technology tool that helps make the driver's job a little bit easier," said Nabarrete. The Kenworth Driver Information Center is standard and provides the driver with instant access to current trip data, including miles per gallon, engine and idle hours, idle percentage and optimum rpm range for the engine. A sweet-spot indicator offers visual cues when the optimum rpm is reached, and a bar graph displays current mpg against trip average mpg.

"In making the truck purchase decision, it's important to carefully consider and assess the various, appealing driver comfort features available today that may be useful in both retaining and recruiting drivers for your fleet," concluded Nabarrete.

Kenworth Truck Company is the manufacturer of The World's Best® heavy and medium duty trucks. Kenworth is an industry leader in providing fuel-saving technology solutions that help increase fuel efficiency and reduce emissions. The company's dedication to the green fleet includes aerodynamic trucks, compressed and liquefied natural gas trucks, and medium duty diesel-electric hybrids. Kenworth is the only truck manufacturer to receive the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Air Excellence award in recognition of its environmentally friendly products. Kenworth is also the recipient of the 2011 J.D. Power and Associates award for Highest in Customer Satisfaction for Heavy Duty Truck Dealer Service. Kenworth's Internet home page is at www.kenworth.com. Kenworth. A PACCAR Company.