



Aaron Tennant, owner of Orion, Ill.-based Tennant Truck Lines, has met personally with President Obama and U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood to discuss reducing the federal age requirement for interstate truck drivers from 21 to 18 and allocating funding to driver training programs.

change at Tennant Truck Lines, an Orion, Ill.-based flatbed hauler. Tennant, the company's owner, spearheaded the creation of new training and compensation programs. He also devoted himself to outreach and training efforts that would lead to more drivers instilled with pride, respect and proficiency.

Raising the bar

Tennant Truck Lines owner seeks to instill truckers with pride, opportunity BY AARON HUFF

Two years ago, Aaron Tennant was in Wisconsin to meet with a customer to discuss a rate increase. Tennant explained that for his trucking company to continue to provide service, a pay raise for his drivers was needed to improve their quality of life. He told the customer the average driver is 57 years old and that not enough young people are choosing the trade.

The customer agreed to honor the rate increase on one condition: "I need you to go out and fix the damn problem. Figure out what you can do."

Tennant's four-hour ride back to Illinois gave him time for self-reflection. He realized that by going after customers for rate increases, he really wasn't solving the

The flatbed hauler is addressing the driver shortage by seeking younger candidates and emphasizing self-respect.

overall problem. While rate hikes were necessary to improve driver pay, Tennant concluded they are only a temporary fix.

"There are carriers out there that like the driver shortage," he says. "They can go out and increase pricing, but that's not sustainable. We have to think outside the box and start working today so we do not have a compounded problem."

The Wisconsin meeting was the genesis for

Change from within

The root of the driver shortage, Tennant argues, is the age gap between the state and federal requirements for commercial driver's licenses. Today, 38 states permit 18-year-olds to obtain a CDL for intrastate travel without any formalized training program, but a federal age requirement of 21 dissuades young people from pursuing a transportation career. Young people also have been led to believe that being a "trucker" is not a respectable or lucrative career.

Tennant passionately wants to change the status quo. He began driving trucks when he was 18 years old and became successful by learning every step of the way. His career in transportation started as a third-generation member in the family business working in the shop at age 10. After he completed high school, he chose not to attend college even though he had the opportunity. "I wanted to drive a truck," he recalls.

Since making that decision, Tennant has grown in his career from driving to dispatching, managing information technology, sales and most recently ownership. He still prefers to use the same title he did at age 18. "I tell people I am a trucker," he says. "I'm proud of that."

Most drivers and managers don't have opportunities to jumpstart their careers in a family business. On the other hand, family businesses also can stifle ambition for both the company and the people involved. In 2009, Tennant persuaded his father to sell his stock and took control of the company to create an organization that was primed for growth.

Prior to 2009, only family members were allowed to attend management meetings. Since buying the company, Tennant has hired new personnel for accounting, safety and information technology. His objective was to ensure

the way we wanted them to be treated," Tennant says.

Tennant Truck Lines pays drivers on practical miles with a guaranteed weekly minimum. Drivers also have the opportunity to increase their wages significantly. A driver scorecard was created to allow drivers to increase monthly pay by 6 cents per mile for doing "the right thing." Drivers receive monthly bonuses if they meet company metrics for fuel savings, customer service and Compliance Safety Accountability scores.

The scorecard also includes a subjective piece that "allows us to rate them in some ways that make HR people nervous," Tennant says. This subjective portion is related to appearance and attitude. "It is easy to measure on-time pickups, fuel mileage and CSA scores, but what else is driving that behavior?

We think it is self-respect. Once you get that, all the other stuff falls in line. They are going to do the right thing."

- Aaron Tennant, owner, Tennant Truck Lines

In order to guarantee drivers a minimum mileage,

Tennant Truck Lines has had to refocus its sales efforts to customers. If a driver is available but does not get the minimum weekly mileage due to permit delays or other reasons, Tennant expects customers to help out.

Since implementing the new programs in 2009, Tennant Truck Lines has seen driver turnover dip as low as 37 percent. Turnover since has crept up to about 50 percent due to supply and demand forces. By comparison, turnover at large fleets was 88 percent in April, according to the American Trucking Associations.

"Without our initiatives, we would be near the national average," Tennant says. "I'm disappointed it went up, but had we not deployed a lot of programs and processes, it would be worse."

Outreach efforts

Attracting new drivers to the industry may be a more difficult challenge, but it's a cause that stirs Tennant, who co-chairs the Truckload Carriers Association's membership committee and has lobbied Congress to reduce the federal age requirement from 21 to 18 and allocate funding to driver training programs. He also has met with President Obama and U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood about the topic.

"I am very passionate about the fact that we need to bring younger people into the industry," Tennant says. "We lose so many of them. A certain percentage of them are not college-bound. They need to realize there is nothing wrong with entering the work force at a young age."

Tennant Truck Lines works with local high schools to create awareness programs about driving careers. The company also teams with area community colleges to help in the mentoring and finishing programs for new drivers.

"Truck driving schools teach the fundamentals, but I don't know they are teaching them to prepare for the bit of isolation these folks have," he says.

Although Tennant Truck Lines operates in all of the 48 contiguous states, it actively is targeting intrastate freight to increase the number of younger drivers it can hire. The company now employs a few drivers under the age of 21; to make this possible, it worked closely with an insurance carrier to create a detailed training program.

Tennant admits the current program is expensive and cumbersome, but it is a start. "I've been an advocate of lowering the age for a long time because I did it when I was 18," he says. "That proved very successful."

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"I tell people I am a trucker. I'm proud of that."

the company had the best possible skillset for managers at every position, regardless of family connections.

"Hard decisions had to be made," he says. "I was upsetting the apple cart, but I knew it had to be done."

Tennant credits the personnel moves for helping the company grow from 75 trucks to 165 since 2009, with plans to add 25 more this year. The brokerage arm of the business has grown from \$600,000 a month to \$1 million.

With the changes in management, the culture at Tennant Truck Lines has remained centered around the phrase "Do the right thing with the driver." This is the focus of every conversation during daily staff meetings.

"We have had to terminate a few operations folks that didn't treat drivers