


Road freight transport: generations forged career path

By CHRIS RAY

12:00AM APRIL 18, 2018 •  COMMENTS

“Who gives an unskilled person a \$750,000 vehicle to drive down the road?” asks Adrian “Flea” Nolan, director of Nolan’s Interstate Transport in Queensland.

It’s a question Flea Nolan puts to anyone who suggests driving big trucks is a low-skill job.

“Contrary to public perception, truck driving is a highly professional job with a lot of skill involved. I don’t understand why it’s not on a par with the traditional trades,” he says.

Nolan says heavy-vehicle drivers can earn between \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. Despite the fairly good money, 46 per cent of transport companies reported a driver shortage in a 2016 industry survey.

The survey by Volvo confirmed the industry is well aware it has an image problem: 88 per cent of respondents believed the public had a negative perception of truck drivers.

The survey also found the average age of truck drivers was 47, only 15 per cent were under the age of 30, and only 3 per cent were women.

Flea and his brother Darren are the third generation of Nolans to lead the company, which operates about 150 trucks.

As a young boy, Flea Nolan spent hours sitting in truck cabins alongside his late father, Terry.

“I was driving farm vehicles when my feet could barely touch the pedals,” he says.

“Today’s occupational health and safety laws don’t permit that of, course. As a result, kids can’t learn about the industry until they become adults.”

Nolan's, based at Gatton between Brisbane and Toowoomba, is not immune to the industry-wide driver shortage and currently has vacancies for seven heavy-vehicle drivers.

Flea Nolan blames the driver shortage on road transport's "outdated" public image and absence of a clear career pathway from school to a driving job. Nolan's has joined Queensland's GenR8 school-to-work transition program for the transport industry. Year 12 students learn administration, workshop and operational skills at the company's depot.

"We want to give kids a taste of the transport industry while they are still at school," he says.

GenR8 seeks to bridge the gap between leaving school and gaining the age, qualifications and experience needed to enter the workforce as a licensed driver.

The program can lead to certificates in yard operations and scheduling and may serve as a pathway to a driving job.

Julie Russell, director of Brisbane-based Russell Transport, agrees industry involvement with schools is vital.

"People still imagine the truck driver as a bloke in a blue singlet and stubbies working in a dirty environment and being forced to eat bad food all the time," says Russell, who chairs the Australian Trucking Association's national skills and workforce committee.

"We need to put on the radar of career counsellors and students the wide range of skilled opportunities available in order to start changing that perception."

Russell Transport employs a female operations trainee who learns tasks such as invoicing, planning and quoting for jobs, scheduling drivers, arranging driver paperwork and training drivers in use of new technology.

"Russell Transport is used to taking on mechanical apprentices but this is only our third operations trainee," she says.

"Previous trainees did not complete the full term partly because we didn't do it right — we had no structured environment to handle a trainee.

“We are getting more confident in how we supply training to somebody — we want to give them the right mentors, coaches and systems so they can really flourish.”

As president of the Livestock, Bulk and Rural Carriers Association of NSW, Lynley Miners initiated a young driver of the year award to inspire young people to consider a truck driving career.

“We’ve got to be able to grab them before they make a different career choice,” Miners says.

Based in the Snowy Mountains region, Miners has carried livestock across Australia for more than 30 years and his fleet has grown from one vehicle to seven.

He says the job’s attractions include the opportunity to experience different parts of Australia and earn decent money: “Anyone with a good work ethic can earn \$100,000 a year.”

However, Miners was elected as the ATA’s small fleet operator representative in 2017 on a platform of campaigning to reform the current charging regime that, he says, puts a heavy burden on owner-drivers.

Miners says mistakes made when filling out complicated log books are also costly. “If you forget to tick a box or sign a line, that will cost you \$330 for each infringement.

“I recently copped a \$1000 fine because I hadn’t removed all the yellow slips from the log book and returned them back to the depot.

“\$1000 is a big hit, especially for a young guy with a family and a mortgage.

“If someone gets pulled up for traffic breaches or faulty equipment, fair enough, but we need to find better ways of dealing with non-safety related infringements and unintentional clerical errors.”

Miners nominates other problems including the growing number of toll roads — “we are paying tolls on roads that we are already paying taxes on” — and a failure of governments to upgrade infrastructure.

“There are not enough parking bays and some of them are badly designed and poorly situated. It’s a real bugbear for drivers who try to comply with rest regulations or need to

take a rest when fatigue sets in.”