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Demand for truck drivers in high gear

Joe McKnight had worked at a steel drum factory in Arkansas City for nearly five years and planned to retire there. Then he lost his job last April.

He spent months looking for work but found nothing, although he kept seeing ads for truck drivers.

During a December visit to the Workforce Centers of South Central Kansas in Wichita, he was told the agency could help pay his \$2,937 tuition for a five-week course at the Wichita Truck Driving School.

“Everything clicked,” said McKnight, 44.

He now has his commercial driver’s license and recently began working as an over-the-road driver for Olathe-based TransAm Trucking.

He stepped into an occupation that’s wide open for opportunity – good salary, short start-up training period of four to six weeks, and a shortage of drivers.

Starting salary for truck drivers ranges from \$38,000 for local work to \$40,000-\$45,000 for over-the-road haulers. Experienced drivers can average \$75,000 and exceed \$100,000 – if they’re willing to pretty much live on the road, those in the industry say.

Truck drivers rank second behind registered nurses on the Kansas labor department’s list of jobs most in demand statewide. For the second quarter of 2011, there were statewide openings for 938 drivers of heavy and tractor-trailer trucks – the fourth highest vacancy total out of all occupations.

The need for truck drivers could jump significantly if oil production in south-central Kansas takes off in the next year or two as expected.

The state has already taken steps to address the need. Legislation that would allow military veterans with truck-driving experience to fast-track obtaining their commercial driver’s licenses is on the verge of being finalized.

Add it all up and it sounds like truck driving is an ideal opportunity for someone out of work or wanting to shift to a higher-paying career.

Not necessarily, say those involved in helping people find work.

For starters, drivers are usually required to have one or two years of over-the-road experience before they can land jobs driving locally. That means they must first pay their dues of staying out weeks at a time before counting on being home most nights as a local driver.

“We’re not pushing truck driving as the latest and greatest thing,” Workforce Center spokeswoman Kim Cronister said.

The Workforce Center has propelled 25 people toward a truck-driving career since September after averaging only five annually in previous years.

That’s too short a time frame to get a good feel for hiring results, Cronister said. So the center’s first choice for people looking for jobs that require short-term training is to direct them to manufacturing and some health care jobs, such as a certified nursing assistants or surgical technicians, she said.

Shirley Martin-Smith, franchise owner of the Adecco employment agency in Lawrence, who has more than 35 years of experience in the employment industry, knows about truck drivers because her father was one.

“It can be a great career,” she said. “With the quick training program, it has a great upside. It’s just not for everybody.

“It’s a serious lifestyle change. It sounds easy, but it can be hard on your health. You have to have good people skills and know how to manage your freedom.”

Perhaps that’s why statistics show the turnover rate for over-the-road drivers was 89 percent in the fourth quarter of 2011 – the fourth straight quarter the rate has grown, according to the American Trucking Association. That turnover includes movement between trucking companies, said Sean McNally, a spokesman for the trade group.

Even McKnight acknowledges his new job is “more of a lifestyle change than a job change.”

“It’s a good career if you can handle being gone,” he said.

He just finished an additional month of training with TransAm, which included three weeks of driving that had him making a dozen trips to the East Coast and back.

“It’s a different world out there,” McKnight said. “You don’t always have time or a place to take a shower.”

He has children at home, so his plan is to land a job driving locally – construction, grain haulers, UPS and so on – as soon as possible.

Another hitch that keeps trucking companies from filling positions is finding people who are qualified.

Past driving records – such as DUIs, leaving the scene of an accident, using a vehicle to commit a felony – can keep some from getting a commercial driver’s license.

Mike Lewis, service center manager for Con-Way Freight in Wichita, said applicants also often have a hard time becoming certified to haul hazardous materials because it requires an extensive background check. Hauling hazardous materials is a frequent requirement of truck drivers, he said.

'Crazy for drivers'

At the same time, the need for drivers is growing.

Con-Way, based in Ann Arbor, Mich., has seen its center in Wichita grow from 30 drivers to 60 since it opened about four years ago, Lewis said. Con-Way doesn't do over-the-road hauling but makes deliveries to nearby cities, such as Tulsa and Kansas City, so drivers are home each night.

Con-Way also operates its own 12-week driving school, training candidates from the ground up.

"We're in pretty good shape right now (on drivers)," Lewis said. "But in the next two months, I need to start getting more people. In our business, from April to the end of November we're crazy busy."

In Kansas, the only two private truck driving schools authorized by the Kansas Board of Regents are the Wichita Truck Driving School and White Line CDL Training in Topeka. Wichita's course is five weeks; White Line's four weeks.

In addition, Fort Scott and Seward County community colleges offer six-week courses in truck driving. Both have been operating at capacity for more than year, including Fort Scott's satellite campus in Kansas City, Kan.

"The truck driving industry is crazy for drivers," said Rob Minor, who oversees the instruction for Fort Scott.

Northwest Kansas Technical College in Goodland has been approved by the regents to offer a course, but school spokesman Brad Bergsma said one hasn't been started yet.

Wichita Area Technical College dropped its truck-driving course a few years ago, but WATC spokesman Joe Ontjes said, "We're considering bringing it back."

Topeka's White Line and Wichita Truck Driving School quickly fill up their classes, school representatives said. White Line can handle 16 to 18 students per class; Wichita's school 12.

Tandy Noeller, who started the Wichita school about a year ago, said she's considering offering night sessions to meet the demand. She's also considering providing instruction on-site in the oil fields.

Oil increases urgency

Certainly, significant recent oil exploration activity in south-central Kansas is driving awareness of the need for more truckers.

The fact there is oil in the Mississippian formation has been thoroughly known and exploited for decades. But techniques using horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing together are expected to allow producers to separate the saltwater that fills the formation and retrieve the oil in greater volume.

Chesapeake Energy, Shell Oil, Devon Energy and a number of large independent producers such as SandRidge Energy are exploring for oil.

Dan Lara, a spokesman for the state's commerce department, said oil companies hope to know within 12 to 18 months whether enough production can be claimed to make it worth sticking around.

But the oil companies don't want to wait that long to ramp up the availability of more truck drivers, who will be needed to haul water, equipment, oil and a host of other things.

"Currently we're meeting our demand," Shell spokesman Scott Scheffler said, "but we'd be silly not to plan for the future."

That's one reason the state is looking to use ex-military truck drivers by shortening the time it takes to get certified for a license.

A bill that would do that has been passed unanimously by the Senate and the House. But the House tweaked the bill some, so it will have to be finalized during joint conference committee hearings that are being held this week. Gov. Sam Brownback is expected to give it his approval.

Even if it weren't for the oil production possibility, Lara said the state probably would have pushed for the legislation.

"There's already a shortage of truck drivers," he said. "But the oil increased the urgency for it.

"We know a ton of these veterans are coming back and need jobs. They provide a large pool of experienced truck drivers. Why put them through a lengthy approval process when they obviously have the experience?"

Meanwhile, McKnight is ready to hit the road. He just has to finish about a week of testing and he's ready to roll.

"There's good money to be made," he said. "Sounds right for me."

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/2012/03/27/2275395/demand-for-truck-drivers-in-high.html#storylink=cpy>