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Those who don't think truck driving is an important or worthwhile career should talk to Jeffrey Langenhahn. The Plover, Wisconsin truck driver has spent 28 years behind the wheel, the past 21 working for less-than-truckload carrier Con-way Freight.

When he's on the road, Langenhahn doesn't feel like a cog in a machine, he feels like someone whose job makes a difference for his family, Con-way, shipper customers and the U.S. economy. "There's something about delivering goods, being part of a huge network delivering goods up and down the road, that is very fulfilling. There's something I really enjoy about that," Langenhahn said. "Just being part of the trucking culture is very fulfilling."

Unfortunately, the job isn't as fulfilling for many truck drivers. The inability of trucking companies to hire and keep enough drivers is now the leading check on the expansion of truck capacity in the U.S. and that

threatens to run up transportation costs for shippers substantially if the U.S. economy and freight demand start to grow faster.

Langenhahn's experience on the road and at Con-way point to some approaches and attitudes that drivers, carriers and their customers should take note of if they truly want to get a chokehold on the driver shortage and attract more potential recruits to the industry.

Undoubtedly, one of Langenhahn's most fulfilling moments as a truck driver came last month in Pittsburgh, when he was named the 2014 Bendix Grand Champion at the National Truck Driving Championships sponsored by the American Trucking Associations. He was one of 426 truck drivers competing in what has been dubbed trucking's "Super Bowl of Safety."

At a time when truck safety is increasingly in the spotlight, thanks to some severe fatal accidents and the debate over truck driver hours of service or daily driving limits, the National Truck Driving Championships stand out as a testament to how the best truck drivers make safety their first priority, even before they step into the truck cab to begin a trip.

The championships also showcase dedication and skill the general public rarely sees or associates with truck driving. Competitors must complete three types of tests — a written exam on the trucking industry, a pre-trip inspection and finally a challenging driving skills test on a course laid out in a convention center. The entire goal is to engrain truck safety knowledge and continually improve safe driving skills until they are second nature.

The competitions highlight the kind of professionalism and spirit — and corporate commitment — that needs to be more widely witnessed to combat negative views of trucking that contribute to the driver shortage. Competing in the annual NTDC and at state level competitions "actually improves my skills on the road, as far as vehicle awareness and knowledge of the industry — just the whole thing," Langenhahn, who has driven more than 1.9 million miles, said in an interview with JOC.com. "It helps me become an even better driver."

"Jeff is a phenomenal driver and a perfect representative for Con-way Freight and our mission for world-class safety," said W. Gregory Lehmkuhl, president of Con-way Freight. "He's really the role model for the way we want all the drivers in our system to be. I couldn't be more thankful and appreciative for the work he put in to obtain such an amazing award." Con-way drivers, he noted, have won the top NTDC award four times in recent years.

Langenhahn's road to trucking began on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, where he learned to drive farm equipment. "When I got older, it was a pretty easy decision to get into trucking," he said. "I just enjoyed driving large vehicles." Langenhahn started hauling farm products and eventually other kinds of freight, joining Con-way in Stevens Point, Wisconsin in 1993.

What attracted him to the LTL business was something many truckers say they want but can't get — more home time. "I wanted to be home every day," he said. Langenhahn and his wife Nicole have five children, aged four to 20. "Family is really important and I didn't want to be gone all the time. At Con-way I can do that and still fulfill my dream of driving a truck."

Langenhahn's typical day starts at 7:30 p.m., when he arrives at the Stevens Point terminal near Plover. "Usually I'll have two loads ready to take to LaSalle, Illinois, a round trip of about 470 miles. I'll pre-trip my truck, get the trailers, and go down the road." At LaSalle, he meets about 140 other Con-way linehaul drivers coming to the terminal from other starting points.

"We work dock for a while, unloading and breaking down freight and loading trailers, and then when I have two loads ready to bring back, I'll drive them home," he said. "I'm normally back around 8 a.m., sometimes as early as 7 a.m. It ends up being about a 12-hour day."

The key to safely and successfully keeping that schedule, he said, is to get plenty of rest during the day so "you're awake and aware and not fatigued" behind the wheel. "You have to be rested and ready to

go.” His family, he said, gives him plenty of support.

Admittedly, Langenhahn's schedule and work life is very different from a long-haul truckload driver's, but insistence on safety should transcend the type of trucking operation. Safety can be an important factor in attracting both experienced drivers and potential recruits to a trucking company and a trucking career, Langenhahn said.

A company's safety record and culture, however, don't always get the attention that pay and benefits do — and they should. “Nobody wants to hop into a truck that's unsafe,” Langenhahn said. “Everybody wants to get home safely. I think (promoting safety) is key to attracting more people to the industry.”

Onboard technology designed to improve safety is an important part of the bigger picture and can attract drivers, he said. Con-way Freight, for example, has installed collision mitigation technology — basically forward radar systems that can detect vehicles and automatically adjust speeds or even stop the truck at pre-determined distances. “It's surprising how much that technology helps,” Langenhahn said. “It's another aid to make you a safer driver.”

Should shippers care? Definitely. Just think of the issue of vicarious liability, and the threat of pending regulation of driver detention time by shippers from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. Putting driver and truck safety first should be an easy supply chain decision.

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