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Transport in crisis.

For many years now, I along with many within the transport sector, have been expressing grave concerns regarding the lack of new competently trained drivers entering the industry. This concern has now become a looming sense, that the now impending driver shortage has reached a crisis point. The inevitable driver shortage will affect not just transport operators or our direct customers but the community as a whole. It has now becoming a safety issue.

I am constantly dismayed at the lack of understanding by our government representatives, from both state and federal transport ministerial portfolios. Both sides of the political spectrum have failed to recognise the problem, even our bureaucratic regulators fail to see the issue as one of concern enough to implement the required changes. The fact that the industry is held in such low regard and dare I say "contempt" by so many within society is disheartening.

Transport operation is not just about the driving aspect, there is so much more required in order to be a competent operator. This fact is lost on our government and regulators. The situation as a consequence has had no real concerted effort to resolve the very real problem of a massive driver shortage on the horizon.

The obvious solution, an apprenticeship scheme run by the TAFE system.

Competency is now the issue. The standard of drivers has fallen to such a level that damage, down time and transiency within the industry is costing untold millions. This cannot continue. All the hard work we have done regarding industry safety through management compliance in the last two decades will soon be undone as a consequence. The system is letting down our industry, other road users and our future driver's.

This is the reality of the problem as it stands. The average age of a truck driver is now in their 60's. Attrition rates due to retirement from the baby boomer generation reaching retirement age, is reaching hyperdrive. A faster than predicted population growth, combined with a resurgence in the mining industry. All requiring more transport services. While the mining sector is actively competing for limited competent, skilled labour resources. This together with a clunky licencing system is compounding the problem. A heavy vehicle licence is prohibitively expensive for individuals to justify acquiring. The licence itself has little or no competency attached to it. With no guarantee of even getting a job in transport.

Insurance providers put onerous financial restrictions on employers who employ people under the age of 25 and or who have less than 2 years' experience. This can be as much as \$10'000 on top of an excess of \$4000 or more. So, if a transport operator employs an MC driver, who by law is deemed to be competent by virtue of the fact they have the licence. The employer can be hit with a \$15000 excess bill if an incident takes place. For many in our industry with tight margins, this is a risk too great to take. So how does the licence holder gain experience?? If you think this is a catch 22 situation you would be correct. As with upgrading from a Heavy Rigid to A Heavy Combination the

individual only has to possess the licence for one year and not actually drive in the industry. This is completely inappropriate. The system is not only letting down drivers and the companies that employ them. The system is also letting down the general public, who place their lives at risk every day as a consequence. I am not being alarmist by saying this, it is a reality. When the public perception becomes a reality that passing a heavy combination vehicle, is like playing Russian Roulette, we have not only an image problem. We also have a looming safety problem. With regard driver competence we have a safety issue. No amount of regulation or technology other than fully autonomous road trains will save us from the cost of poorly trained operators.

Combine all this with workers compensation and health related issues of aging drivers which also preclude transport companies from employing high risk individuals. Insurance premiums for most transport companies can total in excess of \$10,500 per employee per year. For a company that employs a modest number of people, this is a massive insurance premium. Insurance premiums are growing and is a cost that must be passed onto the consumer. Just another reason for our legislator's, regulators and captains of industry to wake up.

Training as it stands is totally inadequate. Disjointed, lacking cohesive industry consistent procedure. There is no clear pathway from the education system into the industry. For those that want the opportunity it is difficult. RTO'S have proven a waste of time as the outcome is financially driven. They do not provide the consistent training in hands on skill levels required and the certificates are not held in esteem by the industry.

let's face it, the industry is seen by many to be a dead-end job. We need to change this perception as it is a perception. The reality is a transport sector job can give job security a lifetime of reward both financially, be personally fulfilling and lead to opportunity. However low self-esteem is reflected as a lack of professionalism by many drivers.

While some sectors of the economy have experienced job loss over the past few decades from automation and uncompetitive high cost of production. Many unable to compete on an international level. The transport industry bucking this trend continues to grow. Industries like manufacturing are contracting or disappearing all together, textiles are almost a thing of the past. The complete shutdown of the car industry which had billions of tax payer dollars poured into it over many years. An investment by the nation that now has nothing to show for the money spent. Yet transport is still ignored to a large degree. We have not seen these people re trained into a growing sector like transport. As a consequence in many regional areas we have a situation of unemployment rates as high as 8 and 10%, youth unemployment as high as 15% and a driver shortage.

We have the Western Australian school of mines and numerous Agricultural schools providing quality skills, with dedicated facilities, supported by both government and their respective industries. Yet a crucial industry like transport that provides services which enables both mining and agriculture to function is largely unsupported.

The solution to all this is not simple but obvious. We need to develop an apprenticeship system creating a pathway from the education system with real skill-based TAFE supported skill sets. We need a dedicated training facility with both class room, hands on work shop and driving test track. Not just theory-based education but real hands on practical skills. Time is running out we cannot continue to just talk about this problem. We need action, we need investment in the future and we need it now.

Regards Mark Mazza CEO South West Express.