

# Drivers: Changing the rules

// BY PETER MACKAY ON 9 SEP 2022



**A shortage of drivers threatens the viability of transport in Europe but, says Francesco Mattozzi\* of Chemical Express, there are steps that can be taken**

Two and a half years of living in a pandemic has upset our lives and our way of life, changing our habits and transforming our homes into places of work. For transport planners, one of the major problems caused by the Covid-19 response has been the worsening of the driver shortage – a situation that has only been worsened further by the conflict in Ukraine. Europe and North America are lacking tens of thousands of truck drivers now, with little prospect of improvement.

The risk of finding supermarkets with empty shelves or filling stations with no fuel is therefore not something from a science fiction movie but something dangerously realistic.

The current lack of drivers has distant origins: a generation gap was created among the driver fraternity and the progressive ageing of existing drivers has come up against the difficulty in replacing those who retire with young people. Initially western Europe filled the gap with drivers from eastern European countries but improving economic conditions in their home countries many to leave and the Russia-Ukraine conflict has blocked new arrivals.

Various trade bodies in the logistics sphere, including the European Chemical Transport Association (ECTA), have begun to analyse the problem from a new perspective: drivers represent a category of workers that are indispensable for our way of life; therefore, despite technological advances such as self-driving vehicles and drone deliveries, we cannot stand back and witness their progressive disappearance.

## LACK OF TIME

So, what is there to be done? To start with, we can look at those situation that cause dissatisfaction for drivers and lead them to want to leave the profession; this involves not just transport companies but all stakeholders, including customers.

In recent years, customers have demanded even greater flexibility from their logistics service partners (LSPs) in order to improve their own internal processes. This has led to exasperating slot planning, limited hours, cumbersome processes and difficult access to sites – a series of measures which, while indeed optimising customers' operations, have complicated the lives of drivers.

Any transport company and its drivers can talk about waiting days if the loading or unloading slot is lost, even for a few minutes; waiting for hours due to a lack of availability of loading operators, laboratory analysts or other staff. Sometimes, when it seems the driver can start to load or unload, it is not possible because site staff cannot work overtime and the driver has to wait till the next day.

These are situations at the limit – but unfortunately they do happen, especially with Covid-related restrictions. Drivers often also tell us about the difficulties in finding rest areas where they can refresh themselves, after a working day that can last up to 15 hours, between driving and other commitments.

One of the proposals in ECTA's position paper on driver shortage is that of evaluating plants where product gets loaded or unloaded from the point of view of the driver, who can assign a 'score' via an app, taking into account compliance with safety procedures, waiting times, the way drivers are treated, services available for drivers, and so on. All this could

contribute to improving drivers' working conditions and, with everyone's commitment, to make this activity more attractive for young people and help the generational turnover, Otherwise the risk is that, within a few years, with future retirements, there will be difficulties in shipping any type of goods.

## FOCUS ON YOUTH

Italy-based Chemical Express, founded in 1979, provides tank containers and road tankers for customers in the chemical industry, has been focusing on its drivers for many years. This means not only paying them well but giving them choice over their work – local, national or international – and providing modern, technically advanced and comfortable vehicles, as well as ongoing assistance and professional development, and the provision of accommodation when they run out of hours.

The company is also encouraging young people into the profession, offering training both on the basics – driving licence, CQC and ADR certificate – but also for specific issues such as:

- Behaviour-based safety and loading/unloading guidelines
- Transport regulations
- Safety topics (use of personal protective equipment, working at height, etc)
- Defensive driving
- ADR.

In this way, each driver will be fully equipped to carry out their job in a very professional way.

The driver shortage in Italy is not as severe as in some other European countries: the latest statistics indicate a shortfall of about 20,000 drivers, compared to 80,000 in Germany and as many as 100,000 in the UK. Nonetheless, Italian operators cannot afford to be complacent.

One way around the driver shortage is to make more use of intermodal transport. The challenges posed by the EU's Green Deal to tackle climate change will certainly accelerate the shift but it will also allow drivers to focus on shorter journeys, leaving the long haul to rail or inland waterway transport, and leave them time to spend with their family and enjoy their private life.

In short, the goal is to make thousands of young people passionate about driving again, giving them both a very profitable job and a job that does not completely absorb their personal life, while ensuring working conditions in line with the expectations of a qualified role as a truck driver.

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*ECTA's Position Paper on driver shortages can be downloaded [here](https://www.ecta.com/ecta-position-paper-on-driver-shortage/) (<https://www.ecta.com/ecta-position-paper-on-driver-shortage/>).*

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