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Opinion

Truck Driver Waiting: A Lingering Problem

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Introduction

Truck driver detention, or waiting, is a persistent problem that leads to various complications. This underutilization of a driver's time leads to reduced income for both drivers and their firms. According to [5], drivers only use 6.5 of the 11 available driving hours, with the remaining time inefficiently utilized with activities like detention. This underutilization of the current driver pool may be a focus area to alleviate the current truck driver shortage, one of the main problems currently facing the trucking industry (ATRI, 2021). Relatedly, driver turnover, which can sometimes approach 100% at some trucking companies, may also be impacted [14].

Impact of Detention

Truck driver detention can impact many vital aspects of the business and have a trickle-down effect. For example, driver productivity may be negatively affected. A common goal is to keep drivers as productive as possible (driving as many miles as safely as possible). When the shipper or consignee holds them up, this eats into the 70 hours available on their clock (total time spent driving or on duty). Wasted available working hours are a result where they may be earning no income.

On-time delivery (OTD) may also be a problem if a driver is nearing the end of their 70-hour clock and the shipper or consignee holds them up. In this scenario, they may not have enough remaining available hours to deliver or pick up their next load on time. Systems exist that project when a driver is expected to deliver/pick up and how many hours they will have left on their 70-hour clock. This system has many factors that play into it, such as speed, breaks, and load type. If a driver is not projecting for OTD, a relay may be required where another driver takes the load and finishes the delivery. Relays add notable complexity to the system related to issues like coordinating a meeting, finding an alternative driver to take the load, or altering driver preplans.

Customer relations may be hindered as a result of detention. It can be costly if a load is delivered or picked up late because the driver was held up by the previous or current load, both monetarily and by putting a strain on the relationship with the customer. Customers may withhold loads from a firm if it is underperforming, which gives drivers less opportunity to be productive and the company less business. These reduced loads worsen the initial problem of truck drivers waiting exponentially since it can also reduce future load opportunities.

Driver home time may also be reduced if a driver runs out of hours or is delayed long enough. This becomes an issue when a driver's preplan to return home must be pulled due to being held up. The result is that detention time may result in drivers waiting even longer and not getting paid for it. There are apparent economic problems associated with this, which can also harm mental health since drivers are spending unpaid time in their trucks. Drivers may be able to stop the clock on their hours of service if they retreat to their sleeper cab, but this is still precious time they are wasting that could be utilized in other ways, such as with family.

Safety Concerns

Detention not only leads to the underutilization of drivers but has also been shown to negatively impact safety (US DOT, 2018).

According to [12], drivers impacted by detention may be more likely to drive faster, take more risks, or work beyond their allowed hours to make up lost time and earnings. Simply stated, pressure on truck drivers from work organizations and competitive pressures has been shown to lead to a higher likelihood of crashing.

A correlation has also been discovered between wage rates and safety (Rodriguez, 2003; Rodriguez, 2006), which provides evidence that unpaid detention time that effectively lowers wage rates can be a dangerous factor. Furthermore, pay rates predict the number of hours a driver is likely to work [2], which is a problem given that drivers are more likely to be involved in crashes as their hours-of-service increase [7]. The implication is that more detention time lessens driver pay, which can lead to less road safety for various reasons. Conversely, higher driver compensation has been shown to improve safety performance [8,11].

Detention's impact on altered driving times can also alter a driver's health and wellness. This problem has been noted in previous work, such as [3] calling attention to the need to consider this issue more. For example, waiting can interfere with an optimal sleep schedule. This indirect relationship between detention and sleep can make it more difficult to find parking within the available driving time and positively correlates with the risk of crashing [4]. It also contributes to increased driver fatigue, which leads to less safe driving conditions [6].

Conclusion

Detention remains a problematic issue in the trucking industry. A truck driver shortage is still a problem, given that we are expected to see a shortage of well over 100,000 drivers in the near future. However, this issue could be mitigated if we utilized active drivers better. Better efficiency at warehouses would be a sound target. Other goals like staggered pickup times, extended hours or more staff at facilities, more dock doors, or drop-hook programs may also be beneficial. If the current utilization of 6.5 hours out of the 11 available can be increased by 18 minutes, the driver shortage can be alleviated (Mera and Sirikande, 2022).

Detention fees can often offset the lost income or revenue associated with waiting and lost productivity, but these often only start after 2 or more hours of waiting and may be capped or plagued by complex policies. Some shippers and receivers do not even demonstrate concern about the impacts of detention on drivers [12]. Therefore, this seemingly straightforward solution is much more complicated to impose than it may seem.

The result is an environment where drivers are often put in a position that requires them to wait while receiving no income. This makes this a fruitful area for continued future research efforts. Continually quantifying detention time from drivers and firms will be an essential part of this to continue understanding the problem's scope. It will also be essential to continue to explore methods to reduce the problem, so collaboration between shippers, carriers, consignees, and customers will be necessary. Driverless trucks may also play an important role in the future and could limit some of the problems associated with detention. Lastly, hours of service regulations were meant to make the roads safer, which they have in some regards. However, adverse side effects of the limitations, such as detention time problems, may have the opposite effect. Gaining a better understanding of limiting these negative effects will be essential to make roads safer for all users.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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