

TRUCKING LIVES SECTOR BULLETIN #1: FINDINGS FROM THE TRUCKING LIVES SURVEY

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The freight and logistics sectors underpin all supply chains. While parts of these supply chains have adopted automated technologies, the system continues to rely on people; especially to physically move goods to and from consignors. For this reason, the haulage industry, and Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers, remain an important component of contemporary supply chains.

The business model for the haulage industry is built around low margins and short time horizons. Drivers' salaries can make up as much as a third of a firm's operating costs. Annual trade fluctuations, compounded by the volatility of economic demand, have an impact on the haulage industry's demand for workers. They also have knock-on implications for the coordination of work, with it being commonplace to rely on a variety of contract types, including the use of fixed term, agency drivers to satisfy immediate needs.

Since the global financial crisis there has been a reported shortage of HGV drivers in the UK. This trend accelerated in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and became widely identified as critical to future supply chain security. Driver shortages led to government interventions targeting training, to industry responses such as 'golden handshake payments' to attract new drivers and efforts to begin to diversify what has long been an overwhelmingly white, male workforce by targeting women and ethnic minorities in recruitment campaigns.

It is against this background that, in 2023, the Trucking Lives project conducted an online survey with current and former HGV drivers working in the UK. The survey received 1,980 responses, offering critical new insights into what it's like to work in this industry.

The findings expose four key challenges faced by HGV drivers:

- Incompatibility of the job with life outside of work
- Negative impacts of the job on relations with children, partners, and friends
- Mental and physical health challenges associated with HGV driving work
- Experiences of discrimination at work

Significantly, the findings did not focus on pay alone, but heavily emphasised the conditions of work. These experiences contribute to over half of all survey respondents having considered quitting HGV driving work in the previous year.

Experiences of work differ in relation to personal (e.g., gender) and professional (e.g., work contract) characteristics. For example, female HGV drivers are 2.7 times more likely than male drivers to experience discrimination at work, and drivers with caring responsibilities have the lowest rates of job satisfaction.

These findings are particularly important given efforts to diversify the HGV driver workforce. Creating an attractive job that people want to do – and continue doing – has benefits. Not only does it secure national and international supply chains, it also reduces the cost of ongoing cycles of recruitment and training for new hires.

CONTEXT

There is a strong business case to be made for retaining an existing workforce before seeking to recruit new workers.

With many firms advertising for new HGV drivers, drivers can move between haulage firms to find better pay and conditions – as well as moving outside of the sector. Yet for firms, this results in a loss of institutional knowledge and the financial cost of rehiring. At the same time, hiring newly qualified drivers increases insurance premiums and elevates organisational risk.

A skilled workforce ensures that firms are able to move goods as and when needed. But to secure and retain workers necessitates a job being viewed as appealing in relation to other work possibilities. Appeal might relate to a combination of perceived prestige, pay rates, hours, and work tasks.

Skills shortages occurs when workers exit the workforce and cannot easily be replaced. Exiting may occur due to retirement, but it also reflects the relative attraction of a job in another sector.

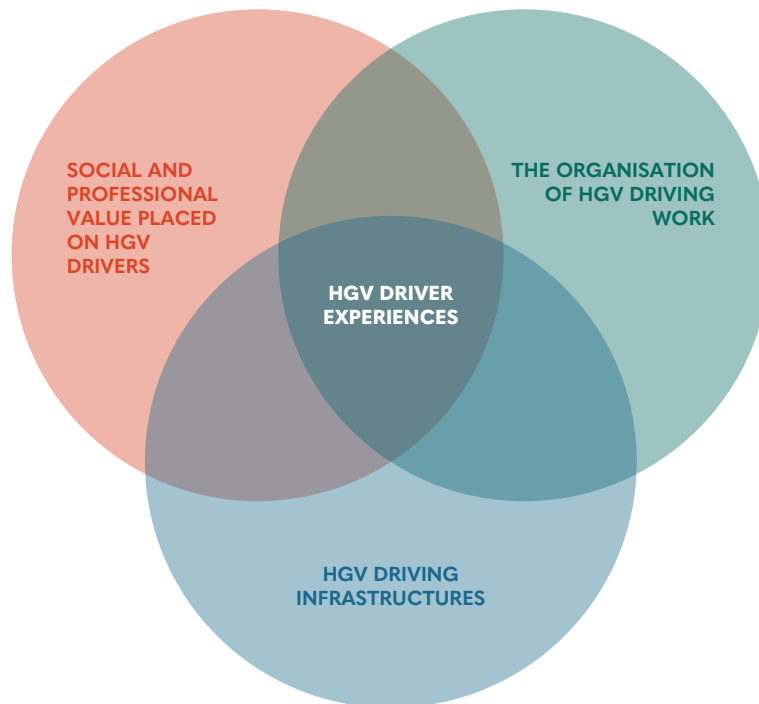
Understanding how people experience their jobs offers critical information to designing interventions.

FINDINGS

The survey findings highlight the importance of three key dimensions to understanding how HGV drivers experience their job (Fig. 1):

1. The social and professional value placed on HGV drivers
2. HGV driving infrastructures
3. The organisation of HGV driving work

Figure 1. Three Dimensions of HGV Driver Experiences



Social and professional value placed on HGV drivers

Survey data shows high rates of discrimination at work, with frequent reports of being discriminated 'for being a driver' by transport office and warehouse workers as well as the general public.

There is a need for sustained campaigns to re-orient perceptions of HGV drivers and the work they do, as well as more

targeted within-organisation training which addresses discrimination awareness and harmful workplace cultures.

HGV driving infrastructures

The analysis signals problems with access to, and provision and quality of, infrastructure including road side services, roadways and trucks. Being denied access to toilets or being forced to use dirty or inadequate services relates to the mobile nature of the job, where workers are dependent on public services on the road or those at warehouses and depots.

It is critical that the quality of these services, and driver's access to them, is improved.

The organisation of HGV driving work

HGV driving work is coordinated within the constraints of driver's hours regulations and sectoral demands. The analysis shows few firms offering work arrangements that could cater to different needs (e.g., part time hours, flexitime) and a dependence on zero-hour agency staff to offer a flexible workforce. This latter group show some of the lowest levels of satisfaction with their job, while part time workers are less likely to have considered quitting than those working full time.

There is a need to address the contractual conditions of work and working norms in the industry, including long hours.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SECTORAL POLICY

The systemic devaluation of HGV drivers and low recognition of the vital work that HGV drivers do can be addressed by the road haulage sector through:

- activities which work to promote best practice in fair and equal treatment of all workers

Driving infrastructures, specifically inadequately provisioned, access to, and quality of roadside services, worsening traffic congestion and the impact of road closures are all issues which will require cross-sectoral action. The road haulage industry can take a lead in addressing the challenge of ill-equipped vehicles.

- Working with distribution centres, warehousing complexes, ports and fulfilment centres to prevent backlogs of HGVs on surrounding roads and the provision of rest spaces
- Ensuring service area provision includes affordable and healthy food options for HGV drivers
- Businesses investing in high quality vehicles with the necessary equipment to make drivers' lives easier and more comfortable on the road, and enforced through accreditation

Road haulage is the hand-maiden to logistics, in that it is logistics that generates and shapes most of the industry's work. But that does not mean that the industry cannot insist that logistics takes its workforce seriously, as people. Industry-wide action, championed by key industry organisations, might include:

- Sector-wide benchmarking of pay including over-time provisions and payment for secure overnight parking
- Developing case studies of how diverse working arrangements (e.g., flexitime, part time work) can be adopted by the sector to enable different forms of HGV driving work
- Exploring how the software packages and spreadsheet management that shape HGV driving work as particular jobs might reinforce biases in the allocation of work, and seeking modifications which can reflect the diversity of working arrangements
- A sector-wide evaluation and annual monitoring of the diversity of work contracts and employment arrangements

ABOUT THE TRUCKING LIVES PROJECT

The Trucking Lives project is a three-year research programme funded by the UKRI Economic and Social Research Council as part of the Transforming Working Lives portfolio. It is focused on understanding and making visible the everyday work and life experiences of the UK's Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) drivers. If you would like to see more about the Trucking Lives project, check out our website at www.truckinglives.co.uk, or find us on social media.

The full report with all research findings is available at: www.truckinglives.co.uk/outputs

